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A Village Tale.

BY

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CATHERINE.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRESBYTERY.

SYLVAIN is a modest village in the Marchois country. At this point you can perceive a few thatched roofs grouped round a rustic church, like ragged children round their mother, who lovingly gathers them together and presses them to her bosom to warm them. This little place is poor, but picturesque; what above all pleases me is that it is unknown, and no tourist has as yet intruded upon its privacy. In winter you could pronounce it a Siberia; but with spring everything changes, becomes verdant and blooming. The village conceals itself partly beneath the mantle of foliage which April and May throw over its shoulders; the wild convolvulus bestars the walls, the cherry trees shed their odoriferous snow upon the roofs, the thatched roofs are transformed into parterres, the wallflowers and houseleek, campanulas and stone-crop grow up in perfect harmony. Near the church, surrounded by limes and elms, stands a house mean enough in itself, but which, amidst the cabins spread all round its feet, has really the air of a little seignorial château. To the truth, it is nothing but the side of a house half in ruins, with a court and a garden, with a terrace shaded by tall nut trees, from which a view is obtained of the valley watered by the Creuse. At the time of the commencement of the century, this house was inhabited by Jean François Paty, who was nearly twenty years curé of the hamlet. Yes, it is now left on twenty years since he came, in the midst of a severe winter, to install himself here, accompanied by a sister still young, and a niece of a few months old. His sister dying shortly after, he assigned the little orphan to the care of a peasant's wife of

the village, with the intention of sending her at a later period to a boarding-school in the nearest city ; but when this was about to be done, the little creature cried so loudly, and clung with such tenacity to her uncle's cassock, that he could not have the heart to part with her. A kind and tender soul was that curé, in whom the love of God, instead of stifling, had fecundated, whilst purifying, the germ of the human affections. He took his little niece in his arms, and in that loving way they went to have the tiny basket-work chaise, which was waiting at the door to convey Catherine to the city, consigned to its shed again. This was a source of great delight, in the first place for the child, then for the peasants of the village, who already loved her ; particularly for the good Martha, who had nursed her, and not least for the curé himself, whose heart, mind, table, and hearth were enlivened by her presence. Besides, the revenues of his cure, little in themselves, went mostly to the poor, leaving still many uncomfortable. To have his niece brought up at a boarding-school, the curé must necessarily trespass upon the funds of the indigent ; so, everything considered, everything examined, everything calculated, he made up his mind, as much from reason as poverty, to keep Catherine at home, and educate her himself.

This education was all it ought to be or could be. Of a kind and primitive nature, loving goodness even to passion, without faith in the existence of evil, or even suspecting it, François Paty had also, unknown to himself, a poetic soul, delightful in its native simplicity. Sprung from the ranks of the people, devoted from his youth to the priesthood, he had embraced the service of the altar from a sincere and fervent vocation. Never had his wishes or his ambition glanced at anything beyond the humble and austere duties which had fallen to his lot in the depths of this poor country. A richer and more important cure had several times been offered to him, but he had always refused, saying, he could never consent to resign the care of his flock to any other hands, and entreating that he might be allowed to live and die in his obscurity. Once, however, the orders of the bishop had been so earnest, and even so formal, that François Paty had been obliged to think of submitting to them. Consequently, one Sunday, after vespers, he ascended the pulpit to announce the sad news to his parishioners, and at the same time to take his farewell of them. At first, master of his emotions, he began in a firm voice ; but when observing, in spite of himself, the painful astonishment that was painted, as he proceeded, on every countenance—when seeing gathered around him for the last time those worthy people to whom he had been for twelve years the pastor, the guide, the

support and father,—overcome by the general emotion, which was scarcely restrained by the respect due to the sacredness of the place, he was obliged to retire precipitately, to conceal his tears and stifle his sighs. Things could not remain so. In the course of the evening of the same day, the presbytery was invaded by a deputation of the notables of the village, presided over by the worthy M. Noirel, who united in himself at Saint-Sylvain the triple functions of schoolmaster, churchwarden, and leader of the choir. He was the deputed spokesman, and he acquitted himself in a more natural and touching fashion than could have been reasonably expected. Being under the influence of a real impression and a sincere feeling, the schoolmaster did not abuse his scholarship, did not perplex himself with set phrases, and, for a man unacquainted with the language, did not quote too much Latin. The object of his harangue was to express to François Paty the regrets, the love, and the gratitude of the village and the commune. He had arrived at his peroration, and the good curé, touched as well as confused at the fine things he heard addressed to him, and which he perhaps felt he deserved, no longer sought to restrain the tears which flowed silently down his cheeks, when suddenly M. Noirel, at the most magnificent passage of his speech, was interrupted by cries which arose from all sides:—"Stay with us! Do not leave us! Continue to live amongst us!" In vain the orator, furious at being cut short precisely at the point for which he had reserved all the resources of his eloquence, endeavoured to impose silence upon the crowd; they pressed around the curé, they seized his hands, they repeated, "Do not leave us; do not leave us!" Some said, "You buried my father, and baptized my child;" others, "You blessed my marriage;" these, "You saved me from starvation;" those, "You comforted me in sickness;" and all in chorus, "Stay with us! Live amongst us!" So that poor François Paty, being able to hold out no longer, declared he would go and throw himself at the feet of the bishop, and with clasped hands implore him to be allowed to remain in his cure. No sooner said than done. On the morrow he set out for the see of the bishopric, mounted upon a little mare of a dingy-grey colour, but which was endowed with a good safe pace and surprising steadiness. He returned at the expiration of a few days, more elated and happy than if he had obtained a cardinal's hat—he had obtained permission to remain the poorest curé in the poorest of all possible dioceses. The news was quickly spread, and I leave it to be judged whether it was not a subject of rejoicing for Saint-Sylvain and its neighbourhood.

From this little episode, an idea may easily be formed of François Paty, and of the soul within him. His was, at the same time, as I have said, a lovely mind, not deficient in culture, tolerant, affectionate, dreamy, and profoundly captivated, without himself suspecting it, with the beauties of external nature ; seizing, without seeking it, upon the poetical side of his ministry, passing by turns from his breviary to his favourite poets, and sometimes confounding, in his cheerful imagination, psalms and eclogues, biblical chants and pagan melodies.

Catherine grew up in the free village air among the other children, whilst her young mind developed itself and bloomed like a wild-flower, under the kindly influence of her beloved preceptor. With every year she became more and more the pride of her uncle, the beloved of all, the familiar angel of the presbytery. At sixteen she was a beautiful, pious, and good girl ; loving God, helping her uncle to do good, and spreading life, happiness, and joy throughout her little sphere. In the village, some called her the little fairy, on account of her marvellous skill at her needle ; whilst others styled her the little virgin, from her resemblance to a portrait which François Paty had given to the church. It is true that she presented in her whole character a singular mixture of finesse and candour, of laughing coquetry and maiden reserve, of petulant gaiety and tender melancholy. On Sundays, at Mass, with her long, delicate, and perfectly regular features grave, serene, collected, with her beautiful black eyes fringed with silky lids, she might truly have been taken for an image of the Holy Virgin ; but as she passed through the village, with cheeks fresh and velvety as the pulp of a peach, her slender graceful form supple and flexible as a reed, she might then be supposed to be some fairy escaped from the calyx of a rose ; such was her winning grace, her activity, and her agility. She was kind towards all, and all loved her. François Paty did not hesitate to say, whoever might hear him, that this amiable child was a blessing from heaven for the country. Whenever it chanced that some distress was to be alleviated, either at Saint-Sylvain or in the neighbourhood, and the purse of François Paty and the poor-box were both exhausted, Catherine sent the embroidery she had herself worked to the next city for sale ; or, mounted on Annette, her uncle's little mare, she went on a begging tour through the adjacent country, and never returned to the domestic hearth without a few pieces in her leathern purse. As soon as she was seen in a farm-yard, or in the court of a château, people cried, " Here's the little maiden, begging for the poor ! " and all welcomed her, and every one put his hand into his pocket. She

was known everywhere within a circle of six leagues, and her appearance was generally hailed as a presage of good fortune.

It was she who decked the church on festival days, sometimes with the flowers she cultivated in her uncle's garden, sometimes with the flowers which grew and blossomed in her pretty fingers. You should have seen how nice she kept her uncle's house, and what elaborate repairs she had effected in the only surplice and solitary cassock of the good pastor! François Paty affirmed that his niece had doubled the revenues of the commune—and it was true too.

"Agree with me," said he sometimes, to his old friend Noirel, "that she is a prudent and clever girl, and that the young man who shall marry her may dispense with the pity of any one. Did you see her last embroidery, which little Jean took to the city for sale? Not a soul in the bourg is capable of doing a stitch like it. With what taste she decks the church on a Sunday! And look how she has mended my cassock! Thanks to her, in spite of our poverty, our credit is always saved. Neighbour, that little girl has her dowry at her fingers' ends; the worthy youth who shall obtain her for a wife will have his good angel visible at his table and at his fireside."

Far from contradicting François Paty in his admiration for his niece, M. Noirel highly prized the skill and address of Catherine, whom he secretly destined for his son Claude,—a tall lad of twenty years of age, who was one day expected to replace his worthy father in the triple charge of schoolmaster, churchwarden, and leader of the choir. Claude already exhibited a remarkable aptitude for this last function, and the manner in which he chanted the vespers had more than once procured him the compliments of his curé. The fact is, he had a stentorian voice, and the church resounded with it from pavement to roof. Otherwise, he was a timid youth, seldom opening his mouth but at the lutrin. He sang on a Sunday, and was silent for the rest of the week. Tall and thin as a pike, with straight hair of a dull light colour, eyes coloured somewhat akin to green, a pale complexion, and a nose *en trompette*,—and yet he had, with all this, so kind, so humble and mild an air, particularly when he was looking at Catherine, that it was impossible not to be pleased with him, and even to cease to remark his ugliness. Notwithstanding his lank and ungainly figure, he was endowed with a herculean strength, which would never have been suspected but for the following circumstance:—

Such were the sentiments of respect, love, and even admiration that François Paty and his niece inspired in that country, that the latter was in as perfect safety in the open fields as she could

have been at Saint-Sylvain under the roof and protection of her uncle. Never did she meet with any but kind looks and friendly smiles upon her way. The country people uncovered as she passed, and the little sheep-keepers, as soon as they saw her coming at a distance, took off their caps and saluted her with veneration; the dogs even knew her, and ran gambolling to her feet. It, however, happened that Catherine was met one day by a troop of five or six fellows, who, not being of that country, and seeing such a pretty girl cantering alone along the lanes, thought proper to address her with a few coarse jokes. The little maiden stopped in a state of utter astonishment, and the insults were increasing, when all at once the head of Claude appeared over the top of a hedge as if by enchantment. Quick as lightning, he who was generally so slow and so peaceable, young Noirel, rushed amongst the six fellows, seized the biggest by the leg, and lifting him like a feather, hurled him round like a quarter-staff, making him a weapon to overthrow or disperse the rest. This done, he threw him, more dead than alive, into a muddy ditch, and walked away quietly, without speaking a word, after having replaced in Catherine's hand the bridle she had let fall in her fright.

Catherine and Claude had grown and been brought up together; it was the village report that they were engaged to each other. In short, there was no one at Saint-Sylvain but young Noirel, who by his education and his social position, could reasonably pretend to the hand of the little fairy. This had certainly been all along the secret hope of the schoolmaster, who at length opened the matter to the worthy curé. Now it so happened that François Paty, on his side, had for some years cherished the same hope and the same vision. But we shall see by what storms these humble destinies and suitable views were crossed.

One evening in the month of May, the curé and his niece, the schoolmaster and his son, were all assembled in the humble sitting-room of the presbytery, around a fire of faggots which sparkled and crackled on the hearth,—for, although it was full spring, the evenings were still chilly, from the melting of the snows, always late in the mild but rather cold country of the Creuse. Seated near a guéridon which Claude had himself fashioned—for neither was he at all deficient in such little ornamental arts,—by the quivering light of an iron lamp Catherine was shaping with her fingers several papers of various shades, which insensibly changed into beautiful heavy bunches of passe-roses, destined for the altar. Her cheeks were as if framed between

two large plaits which terminated in a profusion of black hair slightly tinged with chestnut, forming a kind of basket at the back of her head. Her white neck—rather slender, perhaps, for that pretty head so surcharged with an opulence of hair—was concealed by a kerchief of plain muslin, modestly crossed over her bosom; a dress of brown printed cotton, fastened tightly round the waist, showed to advantage the elegance and slenderness of her shape. Seated within the fire-place, with his hands on his knees and his feet upon the rail of his straw-bottomed chair, Claude, with an air of stupid admiration, was contemplating the young girl, who from time to time lifted her eyes to look at him with a smile, for she loved poor Claude, who had always been so kind to her. The curé and the schoolmaster occupied the front of the fire-place. But we must not forget Catherine's nurse, old Martha, who was plying her wheel in a corner, joining from time to time in the conversation of her masters. The subject was of the most serious nature imaginable. The patronal *fête* of the village was approaching, and they were debating, with visible anxiety, by what possible means they could manage to celebrate that solemnity properly. The winter had been severe, and the curé's resources were exhausted.

"My poor friends," said François Paty, rubbing his hands along his black worsted stocking, "I cannot think what is to become of us; the long sickness and death of Lucas have ruined me, his widow is left with five children in the greatest distress. My vicar is quite importunate with me for a new surplice. The worthy fellow has given up to me his poor salary for the last two months, and I cannot give him the surplice he is so anxious for. My own is nothing but patches, and my alb will not hold together. With God's grace, Catherine will deck the altar with some of her most beautiful flowers, Claude will sing in his best voice, and good Saint-Sylvain must be content. We will endeavour to celebrate his festival better next year."

As he finished these words the door of the room was opened, and the rural postman entered, presenting to the curé an enclosed letter, sealed with a large wax seal bearing the arms of the bishopric. François Paty broke the seal with due respect, but scarcely had he glanced over the contents of the letter from the grand-vicar, than the said letter escaped from his hands, and he sat upright in his chair in a state of consternation, without the power of uttering a single word. Catherine took up the letter and began to read it with great anxiety, but scarcely had she finished it when she sank back into her seat, more trembling and terrified than her uncle. In his turn, M. Noirel read the fatal

letter, but before he had read the first page he appeared thunder-struck on the spot. Claude himself, the impassable Claude, could not read this strange letter without being seized with fright and stupor. When we tell the reader that the grand-vicar announced to François Paty that the pastoral visit of monseigneur the bishop would take place on Saint-Sylvain's day, that very day already the innocent cause of so much trouble and embarrassment, an idea may easily be formed of the consternation which followed the announcement of such a rare honour.

Happily François Paty was so little accustomed to look forward to, or to care about anything that concerns the realities or vanities of this world, that he had soon made his mind up.

"Come, come," said he, rising, "we must not allow the visit of monseigneur to be a subject of trouble and desolation. We will do our best, and monseigneur will not prove more exigent than good Saint-Sylvain himself.

Thereupon, as he had been trotting during the whole day over mountains and valleys, he retired to bed, after having shaken hands with the Noirels, bid Martha good night, and kissed Catherine.

"Divine goodness!" exclaimed Martha, as soon as he was gone, "Saint-Sylvain's festival to be kept, and monseigneur the bishop to be received, and not a bottle of wine in the cellar!—not a couple of fowls or ducks in the poultry-yard!—not ten crowns in master's purse. The vicar's surplice is in rags, monsieur the curé's alb is falling in tatters. Heavenly justice! what will become of us?"

"It is certainly a very serious case," said M. Noirel, shaking his head.

"What is to be done?" added Catherine. "The money for my last embroidery is gone to the poor. I attempted to make a collection yesterday in the neighbourhood, but almost all the rich proprietors are absent; and I got nothing worth speaking of. My dear M. Noirel, do you know nobody that can come to our assistance?"

M. Noirel might have offered himself, for he had a store of crowns, had that old churchwarden,—at least so it was said, but the crowns were never seen. If his self-love as one of the faithful suffered for the penury of the church, his avarice remained the stronger. He was accustomed to give two sous to the collection every Sunday, and when he saw Catherine in difficulties, he always said, with the best countenance possible, "I do all I can; I give something every Sunday." Nevertheless, this visit of monseigneur's plunged him into a profound state of

perplexity, he recalled to his mind, one by one, the repairs of the vicar's surplice, and perhaps was thinking, however unwilling, of making a sacrifice to save the honour of the parish, when, all at once, Catherine, who had for some minutes been silent and thoughtful, bounded from her chair, like a fawn upon the green-sward.

"I have one hope left," cried she. "Yesterday I passed before the old château of Bigny. The shutters, which I have hitherto always seen closed, were wide open, and I could not help thinking the masters had come back again. I do not know them, because it is more than twenty years since they left the country; but something whispers me they are generous, good, and charitable. I will set out to-morrow morning on Annette. I will present my collecting-purse to them, and I shall think myself very unlucky if they do not drop one or two white pieces into it."

"That is an idea," cried M. Noirel, hastening to repress his good intentions, and delighted at being let off at so cheap a rate. "Twenty years ago, the Comte de Songères did not pass precisely for a very generous nobleman, or even for a charitable one; he was not religious, and no one remembered ever having seen him on a Sunday at Mass, but we will hope that God and time have softened the heart of the sinner."

The next morning, by daybreak, Catherine dressed herself as well as she was able. She plaited her beautiful hair with the greatest care, and drew from a high cupboard, which exhaled the perfume of dried flowers, a smart straw bonnet, which was only allowed to see the air upon great occasions. Claude was waiting for her at the door of the presbytery with Annette, whom he had saddled and bridled at the first peep of dawn. The little fairy sprang into her saddle, light and lively as a bird, and soon disappeared round the turning of the road, but not without having more than once looked round to wave her hand to poor Claude, whose eyes followed her with a sad and fascinated expression.

It was a lovely morning. Catherine glided along the hedges at the tardy pace of her steed, inhaling the fresh odours which the frolicsome breezes wafted towards her, and full of confidence in the result of the enterprise she had undertaken. Nevertheless, as she drew nearer the end of her journey, her hopes began to fade a little, and her confidence wavered. All the people she inquired of on her route agreed in saying that the Château de Bigny was not a safe place, and that the Comte de Songères was a stern and ill-disposed man. On discovering the front of the

château, which arose, cold and black, with its towers and bastions, at the extremity of a large park planted with yews, cypresses, firs, and larches, Catherine experienced a vague sentiment of terror, and was on the point of turning bridle; but she thought of the visit of monseigneur, of the festival of Saint-Sylvain, of her uncle's alb, and the vicar's surplice, and taking, as is said, her courage in both hands, she gave her pony two or three kicks in the flank with her little foot, to which Annette responded by taking her up to the gate in a brisk trot.

CHAPTER II.

THE CHATEAU.

As soon as she gained the park gate, Catherine sprang lightly from the saddle, and proceeded immediately to fasten her pony by the bridle to the branch of a birch tree. It was midday, and the trees cast but little shade. The little maiden had set out at daybreak; but besides its being reckoned five good hours' journey from St. Sylvain to the Château de Bigny, Annette was not exactly possessed of wings, and persisted in lingering along the hedges, to snap off the young buds and get a taste of the tender grass which grew along the sides of the roads. After having given a glance at her toilet, and examined herself from head to foot, the pretty collector opened the gate, not without a little trepidation; but as she was about to pass through it, she saw Claude, who came up to her covered with perspiration and out of breath. Catherine at once concluded that something had happened at the Presbytery; she turned very pale, and stepped hastily towards the worthy lad—

"Claude! what can be the matter?" asked she in a terrified tone.

"Stop, Catherine," replied the son of the schoolmaster, "if you will take my advice, you will remount Annette, and come back again, without prosecuting this adventure any further. Very evil reports are in circulation concerning the château. You had not been gone three hours, when I met Father Radigois, who said to me, 'I have just seen the little maiden pass, she is going, I under-

stand on a begging errand to Bigny; she had better go to the infernal regions to beg.' Mother Simon told me as much, and every one who had seen you go by repeated the same. So I took to my heels, and made all speed to overtake you. Thank God! I have arrived in time! Catherine, do not proceed any further, it is the advice of the whole village."

"Well, well," replied Catherine, half-smiling and half-frightened, "what harm do you fancy can happen to me? The worst must be to be refused, and to return as I came, with empty hands and a light purse, if so it please God! But, however hard and wicked he may be, I cannot believe that the Comte de Songères will repulse a poor little creature like me. Whatever may be said of him, he is not an ogre, and you and I are not standing at the gate of Blue Beard's castle."

At these words, Claude applied one of his fingers to his lips, and threw around a furtive and fearful glance. After having ascertained that no one was watching or could hear him,—

"Catherine," said he, in a low voice, "whether his beard be blue, white, black, or grey, the Comte de Songères is not much better, and his château is not more safe. Come back, Catherine, the linnet does not venture into the nest of the osprey; the hind does not risk its safety in the den of the wolf."

"Why, you would persuade me next," cried Catherine, "that this Comte de Songères eats little girls."

"Dame!" replied Claude; "it is very well known that he killed his first wife, and that it is on that account he has been absent from the country these twenty years. During the month he has been back he has seen nobody, spoken to nobody, and all who have caught a glimpse of him through the trees of his park declare that he looks more stern and terrible than he was before his departure, without reckoning that his steward, M. Robineau, never looks kindly upon any one. I know him well enough,—a stingy fellow who, during all the twenty years he has been at the château, has neither given a loaf to the poor nor a farthing to the parish. Once more, Catherine, come away; I have a positive presentiment that some misfortune will happen to you in this place."

"But, Claude," replied the maiden, seating herself in discouragement upon a green bank, "what is to become of us? Think of Saint-Sylvain, and the bishop's visit! Martha did not at all exaggerate yesterday evening; both the poultry-yard and the cellar are empty, and there are not ten crowns in the chest! My uncle's alb is past mending, and as to the vicar's surplice—it is enough to break one's heart to think of it."

"That is but too true," said Claude, "it pierces one's soul! Last Sunday, whilst chanting the vespers, I could not help looking at that miserable surplice,—it almost choked me."

"Well," added Catherine, "what sort of an idea, then, will monseigneur form of the state of the presbytery? How can we receive him? What an opinion of us he will carry away!"

"Bah! bah!" cried Claude; "Martha will make some of her nice buckwheat cakes, which you yourself shall hand to him, and with that a glass of cider, and monseigneur must be very difficult to please if, on his return to Limoges, he does not boast of having eaten the best cakes in the diocese, served by the most charming girl in the country."

"My poor Claude," said Catherine, smiling sadly, "you do not appear to consider the seriousness of the circumstances. Now, look: for example, suppose your father should receive a letter from Paris, informing him that the king was about to pay a visit to his school—it is not probable that such a thing should ever happen, but yet it might,—would not M. Noirel, do you think, rack his invention in a hundred ways to entertain such a guest? You yourself, would you stand with your arms crossed? Would you wear your vest with a hole in the elbow? Could you think it possible to avoid putting a goose upon the spit on such a day? Well, Claude, it is more than a king who is announced; it is more than an emperor that is coming to seat himself at our table and repose beneath our humble roof; it is a prince of the holy Church, it is a man of God, venerable in person and in office."

At these words, Claude mechanically made the sign of the cross, and he and Catherine looked at each other in silence.

"Come, come," at length Catherine cried, rising all at once with a resolute air, "I will not be reproached for having omitted anything, or neglected anything to save the credit of the village. I am convinced this comte is not so bad as they say he is; I feel a presentiment that he will be touched by my petition. Now look, am I not very smart?" added she, surveying herself with the grace of a wagtail making its toilet in the sun. "Now, only fancy for an instant that you are Comte de Songères, and that I present my collecting-purse to you, with a little compliment, do you think you could refuse to drop a trifle into it?"

"Oh! my Catherine," replied the worthy youth in an agitated voice, taking one of her hands and pressing it between both his; if I were the Comte de Songères, and you presented your purse to me, I would place my château, my park, my lands, my farms, and my heart all in it together."

"You see plainly, then, that I must succeed!" cried the little fairy, clasping Claude round the neck.

"May God hear you and watch over you," said Claude; "but, for greater safety, I will accompany you."

"No," replied Catherine, after reflecting for a few instants, "that would be indiscreet in the first place, and might, besides, be reasonably considered a sign of mistrust. I will go alone, and you can wait for me here."

"Be it as you please," said Claude, stifling a sigh of resignation; "at all events, take this whistle," added he, giving her a whistle he had made out of a little branch of maple. I will go and loiter about the park; if you stand in need of my assistance, whistle loudly, and I promise you you shall not wait long for my help."

"Thanks, dear Claude, thanks," said Catherine, pressing his hand with a candid movement of affectionate familiarity. "I know that you are as brave as you are good, as gentle as a lamb, and valiant as a lion. I shall never forget the manner in which you one day protected me against those vile men who insulted me, thinking me alone and without defence. It must be confessed, Claude, that when you are provoked you don't do things by halves; with you, I could go without fear to the end of the world. But be assured no danger threatens me here, and that you may, in perfect security, allow your two fists to sleep quietly in your pockets. Wait for me, take care of Annette, pray to God for the success of my enterprise, and think of the joy, if I succeed, of going together to the city to purchase an alb and a surplice, with a few little dainties for monseigneur's dinner."

At this delightful perspective, Claude could not help smiling; but on seeing Catherine plunge into the park and gain the avenue leading to the château, his countenance again became dark, and his heart beat as if he foresaw that from this visit should result the ruin of his hopes, and the despair of the rest of his life.

As I before observed, this park was planted with trees all of a northern climate. There was not to be seen either the aspen with its ever-agitated foliage, the birch with its robe of satin, the chestnut with its white *panaches*, or the willow with its flowing hair; there was nothing but firs and cypresses, with their dark and motionless branches. It might be said that the sun never penetrated but with regret through these dismal shades, which not a flower enlivened, which no bird animated with his song, and from which fell that cold and humid atmosphere which is breathed around tombs, like the breath of death. Without, all

was joy and light, perfumes and warblings. Insects hummed along the beams of light, or peopled the air with rubies, amethysts, and emeralds; the lark mounted like an arrow into the clear blue sky; the flocks bounded along the sides of the hills; the hedges were filled with a thousand delightful cries; all nature rejoiced, and the earth, green and adorned, was like a young bride in the embraces of the spring. Within, all was shade, silence, solitude; and it might be imagined that there existed around this park an invisible rampart which interdicted an entrance to the festivals of creation. Everything spoke of the long absence of the master. Thistles obstructed the paths hidden under masses of weeds. A greenish water stagnated in the basins. The benches, worm-eaten and broken, lay half-concealed under the grass; the lawns were transformed into fields of briars. Nothing betrayed life in this desolate enclosure except a few lizards, which frisked about among the weeds, and some swallows, which darted here and there from the thick bushes, uttering a wild, hoarse cry.

In the depths of this devastated park rose the Chateau de Bigny, dismal and dark, with its towers and battlements blackened and ruined by time. The façade was so mutilated that the ivy could not hide the wounds, the broken shutters hung upon the walls, the stones of the perron were disjointed, and the vanes creaked upon their rusty poles. The breeze, which sang elsewhere, appeared to moan around this mansion of sinister and fatal aspect. Catherine, who had not been able to suppress a vague impression of terror whilst crossing the park, felt her fear redoubled when she found herself in front of that feudal habitation from which movement and life seemed to have altogether departed. After having wandered round the house, without discovering a single soul or the trace of a human foot-step, she decided upon pulling, with a trembling hand, a heavy chain of iron, which appeared to belong to a bell. Immediately a lugubrious and formidable clang resounded in the interior. At this doubtless unusual noise a cloud of crows and birds of prey took flight from the tops of the bastions; and Catherine, frozen with fear, pressed her bosom with both hands, to suppress the palpitation of her heart. The bell was still vibrating under the sonorous vault, when a heavy step was heard, accompanied by a harsh growling. And now the little fairy bravely prepared to turn upon her heel, and take to flight, without waiting, as the proverb says, for her change; but at the very instant the massive door rolled painfully on its hinges, and Catherine saw appear, like an ill-licked bear issuing from his den,

a personage whom she at once recognized as having frequently met in her excursions.

He was an ugly little old man, whose physiognomy partook of the polecat and the jackall. He had on large sabots, and was clothed in a long beaver redingote, enveloping him from head to foot, with an otter-skin cap, which he took good care not to remove on perceiving Catherine.

"Who is that?" asked he, in a hard, dry tone. "Who gave you permission to ring at that bell? Who are you? What do you want? Pass on your way, and don't ring at people's doors in that manner."

"My good M. Robineau," stammered Catherine in a faint voice.

"I am not good," replied he brutally. "Be quick! What brings you here?"

"My good M. Robineau," resumed Catherine with increased agitation, "I am the niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain."

"What is that to me?" replied the brute, interrupting her.

"And I wish to speak to M. le Comte de Songères, who, I have been told, returned to his domains a month since," added Catherine, scarcely able to support herself.

"I see—I see," cried Robineau, all at once, after having examined the little maiden for a few seconds with an insolent, jeering air—"I see—you are that little she knight-errant who goes trotting about the country alone, begging from door to door. *Pardieu!* I remember having met you several times in the neighbourhood. You have taken up a pretty trade, my darling!—accept my compliments upon it."

"That is true, monsieur," said Catherine, with a little pride; "I often beg, and do not blush at it, because the indigent of the commune alone know what becomes of the alms I collect. If you thought to trouble me by speaking thus, you have been mistaken, monsieur. I am, in fact, nothing but a poor mendicant; that is the only merit with which I glorify myself before God."

"Ah, yes, I can very well understand," replied the old satyr, with a diabolical smile; "I can understand that, with such a pretty face, you don't find many cruel; thanks to you, charity must be a very easy virtue in the canton, and costs less than it brings back to those who deal largely in it; but here you are losing your time, my beauty!"

"You are a vile man," said Catherine, who, without perfectly comprehending the full sense of these outrageous words, felt the blush of modesty mount to her cheeks—"you are a wicked man; and I do not deserve to be treated so unworthily; besides, it is

not to you I am come to address myself. Show me to your master."

"In the first place," replied the steward, "my master does not receive girls of your character; in the next place, M. le Comte is absent; and that is all the better for you, my pretty one; for, in spite of your black eyes, your white teeth, and your slender shape, if M. de Songères were here, he would have already ordered his people to turn you off his domains. Begone, my beauty; go and beg elsewhere. There is nothing for game of your sort to browse upon in our lands."

At these words the abominable Robineau returned into the château, shutting the door violently in the face of Catherine, who remained standing on the stone steps, pale, astonished, nailed to the spot, her brow covered with blushes, her bosom bursting with sobs, and her eyes filled with tears. She remained there a few instants, standing motionless, and as if sealed to the stone, when the frightful head of Robineau appeared suddenly out at a window.

"Well," cried he, in a threatening voice, "are you going to stay there till to-morrow! Be off, or I will set the dogs at you."

Devouring her tears, stifling her sobs, the poor girl descended the steps of the perron, and made her way towards the gate; but when she had gained the middle of the avenue, feeling unable to proceed further, she sank down, in shame and despair, at the foot of a larch, and her tears began to flow in abundance. It was not only wounded pride that affected her: she thought of the penury of her uncle, of the vicar's surplice, the visit of monseigneur, and the poor girl wept over the flight of her last hope.

She had been weeping thus some time, and already the sun lengthened the shadows of the pines and cypresses, when she heard the barking of dogs near her. She rose in great terror, thinking they were the dogs that Robineau had let loose; but she was quickly reassured by the appearance of two handsome sporting dogs, which gambolled round her and licked her hands. Immediately after she perceived a young man in an elegant, simple shooting-dress, advancing towards her, with his gun on his shoulder. He was tall, slender, and well made. A shooting-jacket with metal buttons showed to advantage his shape, which was almost as flexible as Catherine's; a cap of black velvet only partially concealed his hair, fair as the ears of golden corn; his distinguished features and the fairness of his complexion sufficiently denoted him the scion of an aristocratic race. He bowed to the little maiden with respectful politeness; then remarking

that her face was bathed in tears, he inquired, with a tone of kindness, the cause of so much grief.

"It is this, monsieur," replied Catherine, sobbing, and wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron; "I am the niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain. My uncle is an excellent man, who thinks only of God and the poor; so that there is not in the whole hamlet a poorer or more needy person than he is. Within a week the patronal festival of the commune takes place, and we yesterday received a letter from the bishopric, announcing to us the pastoral visit of monseigneur on that very day."

"That is a very great honour for the commune," said the young man, "and particularly for your uncle, who, according to what I hear, is quite worthy of it in all respects."

"Alas! monsieur, it is a great embarrassment," said Catherine, in a desponding tone. "The winter has been very severe; my uncle has exhausted all his resources; his alb is worn out; his cassock is very old; and, to complete our distress, his vicar has not a decent surplice."

At these words Catherine's sobs were redoubled, and her tears flowed afresh.

"Pray, mademoiselle, calm yourself," said the young man, with kindness; "I can understand that your uncle is in rather an embarrassing position; but perhaps, by seeking for it, means may be found to extricate him."

"There are none left, monsieur," said Catherine, shaking her head. "A few hours ago I entertained a last hope. Hearing of the return of the proprietor of this château, I thought, as it concerned the honour of the parish, that M. le Comte des Songères would not perhaps refuse to assist us. I therefore took my collecting-purse, and set out upon Annette."

"Who is Annette?" asked the young man.

"My uncle's mare, monsieur—a very good creature, whose only fault is that she will browse along the green hedges. But it is come to this: I am going back as I came, with a hope the less; for M. des Songères is absent, and his steward received me so cruelly, that I am still in a tremble, and, as you see, in tears."

"How, mademoiselle?" asked the young man in a severe tone; "has not M. Robineau received you with the respect due to you?"

"He has treated me as a common beggar," replied the poor girl, wiping her eyes; "he said shocking things to me, and threatened to let his dogs loose at me. I ought to add, monsieur, that I am not accustomed to such treatment. The whole

country round is kind to me; and I even believe that, on my uncle's account, I am generally beloved."

"I am convinced of that, mademoiselle," said the young man, fixing a surprised and admiring look upon the pretty creature; "for yourself, be assured that the Comte des Songères will warmly resent—I will myself resent—the insult you have received at his house. Maître Robineau is an old fool, whom, I promise you, I will correct. With regard to your visit, nothing is more simple or more legitimate. It is not, besides, just that you should only have placed your feet on this estate to leave hope behind you; you have already shed too many tears there."

So saying, he carelessly unbuttoned his jacket, and drew from a side-pocket a little porte-monnaie of carnation velvet, into which he slid two white and slender fingers; whilst Catherine, who observed his every motion, smiling through her tears, and redder than a cherry, drew out her purse from the pocket of her apron. The young man deposited his offering in it in silence, and immediately departed, as if to avoid the thanks of the amiable collector.

Catherine followed him with her eyes, not at all doubting that it was some good angel who had appeared to her in a shooting dress; then, as soon as he had disappeared at a turning of the road, she emptied her purse into the hollow of her little hand, into which fell five golden stars! Judge of her joy and her transports! She saw her uncle officiating in a fresh alb, the vicar in a new surplice, the altar revived, and the church decked like a cathedral, Martha picking a magnificent goose, and monseigneur seated at a sumptuously-spread table!

At this thought-summoned picture she sprang up with delight, and flew towards the gate, without even thinking of asking who this young man was, who, from sad and poor as she had been, had made her rich and happy. She passed through the gate with a light step, but looked about in vain for Claude, to show him her treasure. Claude was no longer there, and Annette, tormented by the flies, had so twisted her bridle round the branch to which she was fastened, that Catherine had already passed several minutes in vain efforts to untie it, when the young sportsman, who had bent his course that way by accident, doubtless, and without thinking of it, came to her aid. He slowly unfastened the bridle, whilst Catherine, standing close to him, examined, and could but remark, from gratitude, no doubt, the grace and elegance of her mysterious benefactor. Annette being restored to liberty, the little fairy endeavoured to spring into her saddle; but having slipped off twice, she was obliged to place

her little foot in the young man's white hand. When about to depart,

"Monsieur," said she, "allow me at least to know your name, that I may place it in my prayers."

"My name is Roger," replied the stranger, bowing to her with a smile.

"Roger!" repeated Catherine; "that is a pretty name, though it is not in the calendar."

Waving an adieu with her hand, she put Annette into a trot; and she, excited beyond endurance by the flies, set off, without urging, at the pace of a rather gentle wind.

In the meanwhile, Claude, concealed behind a hedge, had seen and observed all. He soon rejoined Catherine, who related to him what had passed, and showed him her five pieces of gold.

"They are louis," said he, shaking his head; "but it is all one; nothing will remove the idea that this journey will bring us evil."

They pursued together the road from Bigny to Saint-Sylvain. Claude walked close to Annette, dark and silent, with his head hanging down; whilst Catherine, without remarking the pensive mood of her mute companion, chatted, laughed, and joked, not failing to relate all the details of her adventure, returning to the subject again and again, and never tiring in her praises of the handsome unknown young man,—not seeing, cruel and artless girl as she was, that every one of her words entered the heart of the unhappy Noirel like the blade of a knife.

"Why, you don't say a word, Claude," added she from time to time, rousing him with a little tap of the willow branch which served her for a whip.

"I say," repeated Claude, "that all this will turn to evil, and that this journey will bring us no good."

And then Catherine would break into a cheerful laugh, and throw up and catch in the hollow of her hand the five pieces of gold, which glittered in the rays of the setting sun like the flowers of the broom in the road-side.

When our two pilgrims arrived at Saint-Sylvain, it was already nightfall. They were very anxious about the little maiden, not only at the cure, but throughout the village; so that as soon as the steps of Annette were heard, everybody came to their doors, and Catherine made a really triumphant *entrée*. At the presbytery another warm reception awaited them. François Paty, who had not seen his niece all the day, pressed her tenderly to his heart; and Martha, who fancied she must be lost for ever, embraced her, weeping like a fountain. In order to treat her uncle with a sur-

prise, Catherine concealed from him the result of her mission; purposing not to inform him of it till the very day of the bishop's visit.

"Alas!" said she, tearing herself from the arms of the pastor, "I bring back nothing, uncle;"—a falsehood of which she afterwards accused herself at the confessional.

"My child, you bring me back the joy of my heart," cried the good curé, with a fresh embrace of love. "We will be very economical this summer," said he, "and perhaps, next year, God willing, I shall be able to give my vicar a new surplice. The truth is, the good lad wants it sadly."

The rest of the evening they talked about nothing but Robineau; but when François Paty had retired to rest, and she was left alone with Martha and the two Noirels, the little fairy danced like a fawn around the churchwarden and her nurse, showing them her five pieces of gold.

"Look here! look here!" cried she; "here are albs, surplices, and cassocks."

And she once more related her adventure with the young man.

"His name is Roger," said she, "and he must be a king's son!"

The conversation was prolonged far into the night.

That night Catherine had pleasant dreams,—whilst Claude did not sleep at all.

CHAPTER III.

ROGER.

THIS young and handsome Roger, whom the little maiden, in her village simplicity, had taken by turns for a good angel and the son of a king, was merely the son of the Comte des Songères. Born at the Château de Bigny, he was still a child when his father suddenly quitted the country; and this was the reason why no one beneath that corner of the heaven which had witnessed his birth remembered him. It was never known why the Comte des Songères set off immediately after the death of his wife, without having even allowed time for the grass to sprout upon the grave which had received her.

The report then prevailed that the comte had caused the death of his wife ; the fact was, that the young countess had died of grief and ennui. She was a fair and fragile creature, who was visibly seen to grow pale, decline, and exhale in a few years ;—not even maternal love could attach her to life. The day after her funeral, in wintry weather, the comte left Bigny, taking Roger with him ; leaving, as we have said, few regrets behind him. He was very generally hated, on account of his hard, haughty, pitiless character. After having travelled for some time, feeling very little partiality for France, of a whimsical, taciturn, and gloomy disposition, he installed himself in a little village of Germany, where Roger was brought up, and which became for him a second country,—less dear, however, than the first, of which, though a child, he had carried away a durable and pious remembrance. Of a tender and poetical nature, he grew like a weakly flower under the inflexible yoke that had crushed his mother. He was already eighteen, when his father, under the impulse of folly or reason, married again. A secret antipathy, which was not the less real or profound for being unavowed, had always existed between the comte and his son. From this time this antipathy broke out, not on the part of Roger, whom his father had always held mute and trembling beneath his iron will, but with the comte, who saw nothing in the young man but a constraint and an embarrassment. The young man likewise recalled to his mind all the graces of his mother, and the comte never endured near him, without savage impatience, this living image of the angelic creature he had consigned to the tomb. Children being born of this second marriage, the position was becoming less and less supportable, when M. des Songeres, without explaining his views, and under the pretext of a lawsuit which rendered his presence at Paris necessary, on a sudden determined to return to France with Roger. It is true that the comte had been carrying on for several years a family lawsuit, which jeopardised the greater part of his property in the Marchois country. Arrived at Bigny, he only remained there a few days, and almost immediately set out for the capital, without taking his son, who remained alone in the house, in company with Master Robineau.

On finding himself alone in the old mansion in which he was born, and where his mother had died,—upon that land which after twenty years of absence he had recognized by its perfume,—amidst that beautiful and poetic nature, the vague remembrance of which had accompanied him everywhere,—on finding himself there alone and free, at length master of himself, Roger, being no longer restrained by the presence of his father, felt a new life

awaken in his breast ; it was within him something like one of those spring mornings in which the buds shoot forth, and the sap, for a long time captive, mounts and overflows from all parts, beneath the first kisses of the sun. Being then April, he mingled the songs of his existence with the concerts of creation ; for the first time he respired, with expanded lungs, the intoxicating air of liberty. And yet, the first transports appeased, he abandoned himself insensibly, and unknown to himself, to that disposition to revery which he inherited in the first place from his mother, and afterwards from Germany, where he had grown up,—which had been developed by the isolation in which the early days of his life had glided away, and of which the silence and solitude of the fields completed the exaltation. Chaste and pure, a stranger to passion as to all other things, he was soon seized by that ardent melancholy which the vague aspirations and the awakening inquietude of the senses engender in young minds. He knew nothing of love, and could not have explained to himself what troubled and agitated him ; but he felt within himself as if a dyke were broken through, and as if a wave were endeavouring to escape. It may be easily understood that Master Robineau was scarcely adapted to occupy or turn aside the turbulent activity of a heart that had just opened to life. Roger went out in the morning with the first blush of dawn, in company with his dogs, with his gun on his shoulder, and frequently did not return before evening or nightfall ; sometimes even night surprised him wandering in the depth of the woods, or seated on the banks of the Creuse, by the pale light of the stars.

Such was the state of his mind, when, one day, in crossing the park, he fell in with Catherine in her trouble. For more than a month he had lived in solitude in this poor country, where, it may be well supposed, he had seen or met nothing which could compare with the little fairy ; I can even affirm that he had not even dreamt of anything more graceful and charming. The tears of the beautiful girl affected him ; her artless grace struck him ; her simplicity made him smile. In the country, when one is alone, everything produces distraction : the flower that blows, the leaf that falls, the bird that flies, and the cloud that passes. From this cause, the appearance of Catherine must have been in the existence of Roger something solemn, a real event ; it is, however, truth to add, that, after having soundly scolded Master Robineau, the young vicomte took no more notice of it.

On the morrow he set out at daybreak, not on foot with his gun on his shoulder, as he was accustomed to do, but on horse-

back, upon a little nag of the country, which, although not of pure Limousin blood, was not wanting in breeding or good looks. While saddling her himself—for everybody was still asleep in the château, except the dogs which bounded round their young master, and the cocks which were awakening the sluggish dawn—Roger remembered Annette, the niece of the curé, and the vicar's surplice, and he could not refrain from smiling. On crossing the park, at a foot pace, he remembered the place where he had found the little fairy in tears; at the gate he looked at the birch, around which Annette, tormented by the flies, had so thoroughly entangled her bridle. He recalled to mind the little foot which he had held for an instant in his hand,—he, in fancy, saw Catherine gliding along between the hedges,—and again he smiled.

He then asked himself what sort of a place this Saint-Sylvain was, for his reveries had never led him in that direction; and although the village was but five country leagues off,—it is true, of those small leagues which have no end, and which would make ten good post leagues,—Roger knew nothing of its latitude, and, the evening before, had not even suspected the existence of it. Without even thinking of rendering an account to himself of the charm which attracted him, he had a great fancy to visit this hamlet, the vicar of which had no surplice, but whose curé, in revenge, had such a pretty niece. He took, then, the same road along which he had followed Catherine with his eyes the night before; but when he arrived at a point where four roads met, after having looked about in vain for some one who might direct him, Roger was obliged to throw the rein on his pony's neck, and allow him to take his chance.

"The way to Saint-Sylvain?" asked he, in a kindly tone and with politeness, of an old woman who was sitting spinning on the brow of a ditch overshadowed by a whitethorn, whilst her sheep grazed around her under the guardianship of a vigilant dog.

"The way to Saint-Sylvain!" repeated the old woman, looking at Roger with an air half simple and half jeering; "go on, my gentle monsieur; you know better than I do the road that leads to Saint-Sylvain."

In vain Roger insisted, affirming that he was a stranger, and was unacquainted with the country; convinced that he was joking, and besides, imagining it to be impossible that any one did not know the way to a bourg which had played so important a part in history, the old woman, to all Roger's questions, did nothing but shake her head, and the young man was obliged to

go on at hazard, across the ocean of verdure which surrounded him on all sides. A little further on :—

“My good man, the road to Saint-Sylvain ?” said he, addressing with familiar cordiality a ploughman, who had stopped at the end of a furrow to see him pass.

“The road to Saint-Sylvain ?” repeated the peasant with a grin. “Go on, go on, my smart gentleman ; I wish I knew the road to paradise as well as you know the road to Saint-Sylvain.”

And thereupon he goaded his bullocks and turned his back upon Roger.

The young vicomte went on thus for a considerable time in search of Saint-Sylvain, inquiring of all he passed, and receiving from all the same reception, the same compliments and the same reply, when, all at once, from the top of an eminence on which he had stopped to look around him, he perceived at a distance a black and pointed steeple, which pierced through the foliage, and a few threads of blue smoke which arose round it, over cherry-trees, pear-trees, and apple-trees in blossom. The Creuse flowed below, under the shade of elders and aspens ; and from the spot on which Roger stood, the fresh gurgling of the little waves as they babbled with the white stones of their beds was plainly to be heard.

Roger had a kind of presentiment that he was at length near Saint-Sylvain, and that it was under these shades that the niece of the curé had made her nest. He applied his heels, cracked his whip, and cantered gaily into a shady path, which appeared to lead to the village. He had succeeded, without any revelation but that of genius, in discovering his America.

In a quick canter he had cleared the distance which separated him from the hamlet, and already perceived the thatched roofs and rustic church, when he met Claude Noirel, who was wandering that way by chance, with his nose in the air and his hands in his pockets.

“My friend,” asked he of the churchwarden’s son, who had recognized him at a distance, “have the goodness to inform me if the village before us is really Saint-Sylvain, as I suppose. Although born in this country, I am nearly a stranger to it.”

Claude looked at Roger with a sulky air, and felt a great inclination to twist his neck. He, however, suppressed his evil thoughts, and got out of the dilemma with the exercise of not a little shrewdness ; so true is it that there is no goose of which love cannot, upon occasion, make an eagle.

“Saint-Sylvain !” cried he, all at once, as loud as if he had been before the lutrin ; “why, monsieur, your back is turned towards Saint-Sylvain ! What could possess you to come to

look for Saint-Sylvain at La Hachère? It is as if you were to seek the east in the west, or the north in the south."

"So," asked Roger, with a sign of impatience and ill humour,

"I am here in the village of La Hachère, then?"

"As a proof," added Claude, "there is the church and the house of monsieur le curé."

"Well," said Roger, who began to feel very hungry, "I will breakfast at La Hachère. Tell me, my friend, can anything be got to eat here?"

"Why, my dear monsieur, you would not find in the whole village a glass of cider and a buckwheat cake; if you were to offer a six-livre crown for a morsel of white bread, you would not find it. The winter has ruined us all, monsieur; we are nothing here but a heap of beggars, dying of hunger."

"What!" said Roger, "is there no one here who can give me a cup of milk and a slice of white bread?"

"Milk!" cried Claude, "where on earth can we get it, when we have not a cow left? All our cattle died with the cold; you could not find the tail of one in the whole hamlet. Besides, look, monsieur," added he, in a piteous tone, "you may judge by my person, after what fashion people are fed in this country. It is full six weeks since I deposited in my poor body anything but crusts of brown, mouldy bread, bearded like a Capuchin."

"It is plain, my poor lad," said the young vicomte, slipping two fingers into his waistcoat-pocket,—"it is plain that you are not inconvenienced by your flesh. Here," added he, giving him a piece of silver, "take this, and be kind enough to tell me the way to Saint-Sylvain."

"Straight behind you," said Claude, taking the piece of silver, which he, a few minutes after, carried to the church and placed in the poor-box. "Now, straight before you," added he, after having made Roger turn round, "still straight on, without allowing yourself to be led astray by the narrow lanes that will look temptingly at you, here and there along the road. At the end of two short hours you will come to a mill; then, further on, a large oak which has in its branches a holy Virgin with her infant Jesus. You must then go straight on, still straight on, until you discover Saint-Sylvain. It is there, my dear monsieur, you will find smoking milk, roasted chickens, and white bread."

All this was said with such an air of simplicity, so stupid and yet apparently so honest, that it never entered into Roger's thoughts to suspect the veracity of the village *cicerone*. He thanked Claude, and set off at a gallop, pressed with hunger, and

strongly attracted by the prospective the churchwarden's son had given him a glimpse of. Pardon me, my young and amiable readers! fair dreamers, pale heroines, pardon also this miserable glutton, whom I have not feared to represent to you but now as a poetic visionary, and who, having risen at dawn, and having taken nothing since the evening before, experienced, towards mid-day, the want of placing a slice of no matter what between his teeth. The fact is, he had a stomach more empty and hollow than certain heads of my acquaintance, and at that moment the image of our little friend was certainly the thing that occupied his thoughts the least. He had, at first, set off at a full gallop; but, under the penalty of breaking his neck, he was soon obliged to slacken his speed, having remarked, at the end of a short time, that the road he was following was cut, at distances of ten paces, by large and deep ruts. It was, to speak the truth, an infamous road; at every instant, the distressed horse refused to advance, or else plunged up to the chest in the mud.

The young man was beginning to think that tricks were being played with him, when he discovered the windmill of which Claude had spoken. The sight of this dilapidated mill restored his confidence and courage, so much the more from finding that from that point the road appeared to be inclined to be less picturesque and more practicable. An hour after, as he was beginning again to despair, Roger recognized the large oak Claude had mentioned. Once more he resumed courage and confidence, and, in short, after a five hours ride, exhausted, hungry, able to hold out no longer, he entered, in anything but a triumphant state, into a miserable hamlet, composed of seven or eight human dens, built of mud, and scarcely showing their wretched roofs above the dirty soil. All the doors were closed, and a few pigs here and there alone enlivened this Arcadia.

"It is impossible," thought Roger, "that this can be the village of Saint-Sylvain;" and he was preparing to pass through it, when he perceived a girl clothed in a ragged gown, whose naked legs and feet, though of a form truly charming, did not at all recall the idea of the white marble of Paria.

"Tell me, my child," cried the young man, "am I at Saint-Sylvain?"

"Saint-Sylvain!" replied the girl, opening her black eyes to their full extent; "why, my handsome monsieur, you are coming from it."

"Where am I, then?" asked Roger.

"My handsome monsieur, you are at La Hachère."

"At La Hachère!" cried the young vicomte, who thought he must be dreaming.

"Yes, monsieur," added the girl, bestowing a stripe upon one of her pigs.

"Well, then," cried Roger, in a pet, "there must be two villages of the name of La Hachère in this devil of a country."

"No, my handsome gentleman," replied the girl quietly, "there is but one."

"And I am at La Hachère?"

"Yes, gentleman."

"And to go to Saint-Sylvain?"

"You must go straight back, gentleman, quite straight,—you cannot make a mistake; you will first come to a great oak, where you can see the holy Virgin with her infant Jesus; then a wind-mill; then you will go straight on till you discover Saint-Sylvain."

"Well, decidedly I am nicely tricked," said Roger to himself; and he could have laughed heartily, if it had not been for the formidable appetite which he heard growling like an open abyss in his inside. "Tell me, child," said he, "do people ever eat at La Hachère?"

"Dame! monsieur, we eat potatoes when there are too many for the pigs."

"What! my poor child," said Roger, who forgot himself in the presence of so much misery, "you only eat when your pigs are satisfied?"

"Dame! monsieur, they fatten the pigs to sell them; and as they don't sell me, why should they fatten me?"

"Poor child, poor child!" said Roger, in an agitated voice, quite forgetful of his own hunger.

And he drew some small coins from his pocket, for he had really a good heart, and was not one of those people who think themselves excused from doing good if they have once been deceived.

"Thank you, handsome gentleman," said the girl, examining one by one the coins Roger had placed in her hand; "I will keep these with the money the little maiden gives me every Sunday; that will make me a dowry when I am married, and, more fortunate than their mother, my children may have a cradle."

"Whom do you mean by the little maiden?" asked Roger.

"You can't be of this country, then, my handsome monsieur, if you don't know Mademoiselle Catherine. Or else it proves that you are rich, and want for nothing."

"And who is this Mademoiselle Catherine?" asked Roger, who, without knowing why, took an interest in the conversation.

"She is truly the daughter of the good God," replied the girl, letting her willow switch fall, and piously crossing her hands; "it is she who consoles the poor, visits the sick, sustains the weak, has kind words for everybody, and serves as a support to unfortunate, abandoned children, like me, who have never known either father or mother. Some people in the country call her the little fairy, but I like better to call her the little maiden. However little, monsieur, you may have been about the neighbourhood, you must have met her on her little grey mare."

"Her grey mare," exclaimed the young man, "is its name Annette?"

"Yes, monsieur, as true as they call me Paquerette in the country."

"And this little maiden is the niece——"

"Of the curé of Saint-Sylvain—yes, gentleman," added Paquerette, who had resumed her switch; "you are both very handsome; and it is my opinion, if you were ever to marry together, it would be a very nice match."

And so saying, the girl moved on, driving before her her unclean herd.

It was some distance from the hamlet of La Hachère to the Château de Bigny. Roger did not get home till night; and in what condition it is easy to imagine; more preoccupied with Catherine than he was in the morning when he set out; furious at the snare into which he had allowed himself to fall; irritated by the obstacles; vowing that he would take Saint-Sylvain by assault; fatigued, harassed, thinking, in spite of himself, of the little maiden; and, above all, half-dead with hunger. He supped, went to bed, and the next morning, on awakening, laughed heartily at the remembrance of his adventures. Nevertheless, as a true knight, the young vicomte was not willing to allow that it should be said he had been obliged to raise the siege of Saint-Sylvain.

He set out, then, a few days after, well informed and sure of the road; he even had the precaution to make Master Robineau accompany him half-way. This time, Claude was not watching at the entrance of the village, like the dragon at the gate of the garden of the Hesperides. The enemy entered the place without striking a blow; but, far from finding in it what he sought, he perceived nothing but a few youngsters playing about, and some peasants' wives seated on the steps of their doors, suckling their children in the sun. Roger stopped before the house of the curé, which he supposed to be so from its magnificent appearance. He was struck particularly by a little window surrounded by creeping plants, and of a pretty appearance, poetical and charm-

ing. That he concluded must be the chamber of the little maiden. He waited a few instants in the hope that the casement would open; but the casement did not open; and the young horseman, around whom the children of the village began to flock, was obliged to retire discomfited. He dismounted, and gave his horse to one of the village boys to hold for him. He entered the church; the church was deserted, and the sun beamed mildly through the lowered blinds. Everything denoted extreme poverty, but at the same time exhibited an ingenious piety, great taste, and an harmonious arrangement. The steps of the altar were strewed with field flowers, which mingled their delicate perfume with the holy odour respired in the house of God. Having approached the only picture, which represented the Virgin Mary, Roger at once perceived the resemblance borne by Catherine to this portrait; which, though of mediocre execution, had a natural expression about it. And yet, as he was retiring, the young man was struck with the remembrance that he had been more than once in that church with his mother, when he was a child. At this recollection, he knelt down upon the slab, and when he rose, his cheeks were moistened with tears.

CHAPTER IV.

FRESH EMBARRASMENTS.

In the mean time, Saint-Sylvain was drawing near, and François Paty, who was a hundred leagues from suspecting the surprise that was preparing for him, was not without some portion of uneasiness at the approach of that great day. Not that he troubled himself much about his ragged alb, his patched cassock, or the reception he was able to give monseigneur. He was in this, as in all other things, of a philosophy perfectly Christian, and thought that in the eyes of a bishop, as in the eyes of God, a pure and fervent heart was well worth, everything considered, a fresh alb or a new cassock. But what annoyed him beyond expression, was the despair of his vicar, who, being younger and less resigned, cried aloud for a change of surplice. Since he had

been informed of the intended visit of the prelate, the poor youth could not sleep, and every day bathed with tears his surplice, composed of strips and patches. At the idea of appearing thus before a prince of the Church, he completely lost his wits, and François Paty in vain endeavoured to console him.

"Come, come, my good friend," said the old curé, taking his hand with paternal affection, "remember that there is not one piece of your surplice, one patch upon my alb or cassock, that does not represent some misery assuaged, a trifle of money in the pocket of an unfortunate, or a loaf of bread in the wallet of a mendicant. Reflect that our rags are agreeable to the Lord. Permit me to draw a comparison. When soldiers return from battle, it is a glory to them to appear before their general with torn vestments, pierced with balls, blackened and burnt with powder. Do you think he would be well received by his chief, who, on issuing from the combat, should exhibit himself in parade condition, as spruce as if he had just come out of a box? His leader would have him arrested, and with great reason; whilst on the contrary, he would highly praise those whom he saw in disorder; for he would naturally conclude that they had valiantly done their duty in the hottest of the *mêlée*. Well, we are also soldiers, poor soldiers of the faith; fighting without ceasing every day and every hour, and never quitting the breach; ready to appear before our leader. Let us then be proud of, instead of blushing at our poverty; let us exhibit with pious pride our cassocks and our surplices, which give evidence that we have done our humble duty. In the same manner as it is to the honour of an army that a flag should be riddled with shot, so it is to the honour of a church that a surplice should be in rags, and a cassock in tatters."

Thus spoke François Paty, with a profound conviction; but he saw plainly that his vicar did not catch at his fine reasonings, and he really suffered from not being able to give him a surplice. On the other side, Martha and Catherine had again fallen into embarrassments, from which it might have been believed the generosity of Roger had extricated them. And this is how: the day but one after her visit to the Château de Bigny the little maiden went, accompanied by Claude, to make her purchases at the neighbouring city. She figured to herself that, without doubt, these five pieces of gold were an inexhaustible mine, of which she should never see the end; for she ordered at once, and without looking at them, an alb and a cassock for her uncle, a magnificent surplice for the vicar, some clothes for the five children of the widow Lucas, a choir robe for little Jean, and complete clothing for Paquerette, her little *protégée* of Hachère. At the

same time she bought a gold cross for Martha, and a superb mock-gold pin, which she fastened with her own pretty fingers to the shirt of her friend Claude. They returned gaily to the village; but when they cast up their accounts, they were sorry to find that Catherine had nearly expended her hundred francs, and that there remained scarcely ten to provide for monseigneur's repast. It was quite another affair when they learnt that all the curés of the neighbouring parishes were to meet at the cure of François Paty on Saint-Sylvain's festival. The day but one before this terrible and solemn occasion, the curé, his vicar, Martha, Catherine, and the two Noirels were assembled in the sitting-room of the presbytery; and they calculated with terror that it would require, for the day after the morrow, no less than a table of thirty covers, without reckoning monseigneur's coachman, footmen, and horses.

"There is nothing to be said for it," said Martha; "the poultry-yard is empty, and so is the cellar."

"We have not even a silver cover for monseigneur," added François Paty. "I sold the only one I had left last winter, to pay the contributions of Father Radigois, for which the officers threatened to seize."

"All that would be of no consequence," said the vicar, "if I had but a presentable surplice."

"Come, Master Noirel," said Martha, turning with a resolute air towards the schoolmaster, "you are as much interested as anybody that the honour of the cure should be preserved. You are churchwarden, you sing at the lutrin, and, without reproach, for twenty years you have been the friend of this family; you have eaten more frequently of our soup than we have tasted of yours; we have yet to learn with whose wood you warm yourself; and if the salad is served at your table before the roast meat. Let us see, once in a way, that you are less stingy than the country reports of you. You have crowns—bring some of them forth."

"I, crowns!" cried M. Noirel, trembling from head to foot. "My dear friend, where should I get them from?"

"From your paillasse," said Claude, with the voice of a Stentor, and in an impassible tone.

"Be silent, wretch!" cried the churchwarden, kicking with all his might at his indiscreet offspring. "I, crowns!" repeated he—"I scarcely know the colour, sound, or shape of one. I am nothing but a poor schoolmaster; the education of my son has ruined me. If he should next year fall into the conscription, I shall not have enough to buy him a substitute. If I were to die

this instant, my worthy friend M. Paty would be obliged to bury me for nothing."

"You have crowns, father—you have," said Claude, putting his legs out of reach of the paternal sabots; "you get up in the night to count them."

"Come, Monsieur Noirel, do a good turn," said Martha; "empty your paillassé; you will sleep none the worse for it."

"My friends—my good friends!" said the churchwarden, quite at a loss, "do not believe what this rascal Claude tells you. I have not a sou—I am as poor as a rat. Examine my paillassé. I consent to lose my chance of Paradise if you find anything in it but straw and mice."

Martha was about to reply; but François Paty interrupted her in a severe tone.

"Enough, Martha, enough," said he; "I am convinced that if our worthy friend M. Noirel could extricate us, he would not leave us in trouble. I see nobody but God who can take pity on us. Let us pray to Him to repeat for us the miracle of the nuptials of Cana; and in the meanwhile let us aid each other, that Heaven may aid us. Claude will throw his nets into the Creuse."

"But he won't fish up any surplises," murmured the vicar sadly.

"He is a skilful lad, and will bring back in a few hours a good dish of tench and salmon-trouts. Catherine will make some fritters, and Martha some buckwheat cakes and pancakes. You, my good friend Noirel, must endeavour to procure a few flasks of old wine; and I, to-morrow, after service, will, for the first time, make an appeal to the benevolence of my flock. They are all good souls; and we shall have very bad luck if Martha does not see arrive, that very evening, fresh butter, eggs, and cream, with a few couples of fowls and ducks."

"And my surplice, monsieur le curé?" demanded the vicar, sighing.

"Dame! my poor friend," replied François Paty, "pray to God with fervour; perhaps He will send an angel to deposit a new surplice on your pillow. In the mean time show Catherine the old one, and see if the needle of the little fairy can do nothing for it."

"Alas! monsieur," said the vicar, "Mademoiselle Catherine, who has examined it thoroughly, declares that it would be more easy to repair a spider's web."

"Well, my good friend," replied François Paty, with a benignant smile, "that is exactly the case with my alb and cassock."

The next day, the eve of Saint-Sylvain, was a Sunday. Now, every Sunday, after vespers, François Paty was accustomed to ascend the pulpit to preach a sermon. These were neither displays of eloquence, nor tediously long discourses. The good curé made no pretension to eloquence, and never fancied himself either Bossuet or Massillon. Properly speaking, his sermons were nothing but touching allocutions, familiar counsels, and pious exhortations. He spoke without effort to the understandings of the good people that surrounded him, spoke to them simply of God, kindly of their labours and wants, and never finished without leaving them consoled and better. This time he addressed them as follows:—

“MY BELOVED CHILDREN,—To-morrow is the festival of all of us, since it is the festival of the patron of our village. Doubtless none of you are ignorant of the additional splendour this day is to receive from the pastoral visit of the bishop of the diocese. Yes, my children, monseigneur intends us the honour of coming to-morrow to pass some hours amongst us. You must be aware that you will then see here, in this humble church, the earthly representative of the good God, who every year ripens your harvests and colzas, and fattens your cattle. Let us prepare, then, to receive him as we would receive God himself, if He descended to our hamlet. You are poor; but you possess in your poverty the only presents which the Eternal receives with love—an honest and pious heart, a religious and simple spirit. Monseigneur can demand no more.” And yet, my dear children, I must confess that I find myself in a great embarrassment. You know that my appointments only amount to eight hundred francs; and that explains to you, my good friends, why I am able to do so little good. At this moment I am in greater need than any of you. The long sickness of poor Lucas has ruined me. You will admit that I am bound to offer monseigneur a little collation, to which are already invited all the ministers of the neighbouring communes. You will to-morrow see arrive, from the four points of the horizon, more than twenty curés and vicars, who will not be sorry, after service, to sit around a modestly-spread table, but one still sufficiently covered. Well, my friends, I have nothing: the presbytery is at this moment the poorest house in the village; and if you do not come to the aid of your pastor, monseigneur and all the ministers run great risk of returning fasting. The sanctity of this place does not allow me to enter into more ample details; it is for you to comprehend and to see what you can do under these circumstances, as well for your own credit as for the honour of your old friend.”

At these words a flattering murmur ran through the assembly, and François Paty had no doubt of the success of his discourse. In fact, in a few hours there arrived at the presbytery an immense quantity of cheese, pieces of bacon, loaves of bread, and pots of cream; but in vain did Martha, among all these presents, look for the beak of a fowl or the wing of a duck. A kind of pip had recently struck, without pity, all kinds of poultry; and Father Redigois, who had been one of the first with his offering, declared there was not a fowl or a duck fit to be killed within three leagues. In the evening the schoolmaster presented himself, with his head hanging down, not having been able to lay his hand upon a bottle of wine of any kind. Only Claude was now left; and he soon entered the presbytery, wet to the skin, with his net upon his shoulder.

"Thank God!" said Martha, "here is some relief; we shall at least have a good fry of fish."

"Here it is," said Claude, with a piteous air, drawing from his pocket one poor bleak and two gudgeons; "that's all."

As may be conceived, the consternation now became general. François Paty, in spite of his usual carelessness, began to perceive the seriousness of the situation. M. Noirel evidently suffered in his self-love, in his character of churchwarden and singer at the lutrin; a severe contest arose within him between his pride and his avarice. Martha was bewildered; Catherine did not utter a word, but sat weeping in a corner, mute and confused at having so foolishly exhausted her resources. Claude stood in a melodramatic character, partaking of the simpleton and the tyrant. According to his custom, François Paty retired to bed the first, for once with a sad and preoccupied air, which being perceived by Martha and Catherine, they began to weep afresh; it cut them to the heart to see that excellent man in trouble. When he was gone,—

"Monsieur Noirel," said Martha, "let me prevail upon you."

"My good M. Noirel," added the little fairy with a coaxing look, putting her hand under his chin; "my kind M. Noirel, have pity on us."

"You have crowns, father; you have," said Claude.

"You will never," said Martha, "find a better occasion for bringing them out."

"Good M. Noirel, how kind he is!" said Catherine, still coaxing him.

"Turn out your paillasse, father; turn out your paillasse," said Claude.

"Do you expect your crowns to breed?" said Martha.

"See how handsome he looks!" said Catherine, tapping his cheeks with her hand.

"Excellent M. Noirel! I knew very well," cried Martha, "he would allow himself to be prevailed upon at last."

"He is so good!" said Catherine.

"So generous!" added Martha.

"He loves my uncle so much!"

"He is so attached to monsieur le curé!"

"He is the very pearl of churchwardens!"

"The flower of singers at the lutrin!"

"Go on; give him no quarter," cried Claude; "I repeat to you, that father has crowns enough to pave the streets of Saint-Sylvain."

"I, you scoundrel! where should I get crowns?" said the schoolmaster, folding his arms in despair. "My good Martha, my dear Catherine, ask my life, take my head, make of me what you will, serve me up in sauce, put me on the spit, eat me in salad with oil and vinegar—but crowns! you might as well look for diamonds in the pocket of this beggar Claude."

Notwithstanding this, Martha and Catherine continued to coax, cajole, wheedle, and caress him. One patted him on the back, the other stroked his cheeks. It was nothing but "good M. Noirel" here, "excellent M. Noirel" there; whilst Claude kept turning round the group, singing to a popular air,—

"Father Noirel has some crowns,
Which little cost him, I am sure;
He has, indeed, for I have seen them," &c.

Harassed and surrounded on all sides, the churchwarden appeared about to surrender, and perhaps would have squeezed out a few pieces of silver, when the steps of a horse were heard approaching, and then stopped at the presbytery. Catherine ran to a window, and putting out her pretty brown head, she perceived a countryman, standing by the side of a horse, laden with packages. The little maiden made but one bound from the salle to the door of the presbytery.

"Is it you," asked the peasant, "who are called Mademoiselle Catherine, and who are the niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain?"

"Yes, my friend," said the girl, already red with emotion and pleasure; "what can I do to serve you?"

"I have been directed to deliver these things to you," replied the countryman, taking down the enormous sacks which hung from the sides of the beast, and placing them on the ground. He then drew from his pocket a letter, which Catherine took

with a trembling hand. "It is from Mr. Roger," added he, and, without waiting a moment, he jumped upon the horse, and set off at a trot, before Catherine had time to address a question to him, or express her thanks.

It was the first letter the little maiden had ever received addressed to herself. She stood for a few instants turning it in her fingers, looking at the arms on the seal, and examining with a curious and delighted air the superscription, traced in elegant characters upon fine satin paper. At length she summoned resolution to break the envelope, when all at once there escaped from it a sweet perfume, with which Catherine felt herself penetrated. She slowly unfolded the sheet, and read the following lines:—

"**MADemoisELLE**,—Since I had the honour of meeting you in the park of the Château de Bigny, so much has come to my knowledge on your account, as well as of that of the curé of Saint-Sylvain, of good and delightful things, that I am ashamed and confused at the smallness of the offering which you have deigned to accept. I have thought of the cassock of monsieur your uncle, of the surplice of the vicar, and the reception of monseigneur, and have asked myself how, with so small a sum, you could meet such expenses, and get rid of such embarrassments. Permit me, then, mademoiselle, to place at your disposal a few things, which will not, perhaps, be quite useless to you in the solemnity you are preparing for. By not refusing me, you will associate me, so to say, with your good works, and then it is I, mademoiselle, who will remain your obliged,

"**ROGER.**"

Standing upon the sill of the door, Catherine was preparing to read the letter for the fourth time, when she was awakened suddenly from the charm which enveloped her by an exclamation of loud, wild joy. She turned round and saw Martha, Claude, and his father, emptying the two great sacks the messenger had deposited within the doorway. The face of Martha was radiant, that of the churchwarden shone again, whilst Claude danced round the two sacks like a cannibal round the victims he is about to devour.

"One goose! two geese! three geese!" cried Martha, drawing from the sack, into which she plunged her arm up to the elbow, three beautiful geese, as white as swans.

"Two sets of damask table-linen!" cried the churchwarden, on his side, rummaging in the other sack.

"Heavenly goodness! a quarter of venison!" exclaimed Martha, ready to faint.

"Celestial justice!" said Master Noirel, "two boxes of plate."

"Sealed wine, too!" added Martha; taking out, one by one, twenty bottles, with their corks covered with wax.

"A pâté!" cried the schoolmaster, falling back from a citadel of golden crust, from which exhaled an intoxicating *fumet* of meat, hares, and partridges.

"Coffee!" said Martha; "sugar! liqueurs!"

"Two carp!" cried Noirel, unfolding from their bed of moss and fern two enormous fish, which he showed mechanically to Claude, in order to tease him.

"Why, my darling," asked Martha of Catherine, "tell us if it is not from heaven that all these riches come upon us?"

"It is M. Roger who has sent them," replied the little maiden, pointing to the letter she still held in her hand. "I told you," added she, "he was the son of a king."

"A blessing be upon him!" cried Martha, with emotion.

"Yes, be he blessed!" repeated the schoolmaster; "for, thanks to him," added he in his thoughts, "my poor crowns have once more escaped."

It may be well supposed that during the rest of the evening nothing was talked of but Roger. Claude was the only one who did not sing the praises of the young stranger. He became pale on hearing his name, and his nose, naturally inclined to turn up, was twisted in tortuous folds. He was at first serious and silent, then, seeing that he stood for nothing in the preoccupations of Catherine, whom the image of the absent entirely absorbed, he arose with a gloomy air, and retired, after putting his bleak and his two gudgeons quietly into his pocket.

The little maiden sat up late into the night, alone with Martha, never tiring in talking of Roger, whilst the latter plucked her geese and made preparations for the festival. At last, after twelve o'clock, her nurse insisted upon her going to bed, reminding her that she would have to be up by daybreak, and that only a few hours remained for sleep and rest. The sweet girl obeyed; but she slept but little, and dawn found her awake, lively, alert as a bird.

CHAPTER V.

THE SAINT-SYLVAIN.

At length arose that great day, the innocent cause, as we have related, of so much trouble and perplexity. At a few minutes past four the flaming disc of the sun mounted slowly into the azure of the heavens, and the only bell of the rustic church sounded in full peal in honour of Saint-Sylvain. François Paty, who, knowing nothing of what had happened the evening before, had scarcely slept better than his niece, but from a very different motive, offered up his heart to God, dressed himself in haste, and, according to his custom, went out from the presbytery to read his breviary as he walked through the fields; for he thought that the heart of man elevates itself more easily towards his Creator amidst the splendours and wonders of His creation. The fresh air of the calm morning, the ever-new and ever-young spectacle of the eternal beauties of nature made him forget for a few instants the pre-occupations which oppressed him. He walked through the growing corn, sometimes reading, sometimes stopping to meditate upon that other great breviary which God has Himself written with all which is verdant and flourishing, with all that sings and breathes. He went on, contemplating with a sentiment of exalted gratitude, those woods, those meadows, those hills, this valley; and he thanked God for permitting him to once more admire Him and bless Him in His works.

This moment of religious enthusiasm was short; the peasants of the environs, who were repairing to Saint-Sylvain, soon brought back the good pastor to a sense of the reality. On seeing them all, young and old, girls and boys, decked in their festival-clothes, François Paty could not avoid making a sad reflection upon himself, and he became thoughtful,—remembering with terror monseigneur's collation, and looking with a melancholy air at his nail-shod shoes, his black stockings, bleached by age, and his unfortunate cassock, so slashed by the scythe of time. On returning to the presbytery, he went straight to his chamber; but he had scarcely entered it when he was near falling backwards, on perceiving, spread out upon his bed, a pair of ferret-silk stockings, so closely resembling real silk as hardly to be known from

it; shoes with silver buckles, a splendid alb, and a new cassock, made from a cloth of the country, which, with a little good-will, might have been easily taken for Louviers or Elbœuf. The good curé, in the first place, asked himself if it were not a dream; then, after assuring himself that he was thoroughly awake, he touched all the things, one after the other, to convince himself that he was not the sport of a mirage. He was still holding the alb in his hands, admiring the richness of the embroidery, when all at once the door opened to give passage for the vicar, who precipitated himself like a waterspout into the apartment, and threw himself upon François Paty, embracing him with both arms.

"My friend! my good friend! what is the matter?" asked the curé, quite terrified, and endeavouring to disengage himself from this embrace. "My dear friend, you will stifle me! don't squeeze me in that fashion."

"Ah! monsieur le curé, what a surprise!" cried the vicar, embracing him still more closely. "What gratitude do I not owe you? It is more than my life you save,—it is my honour."

"My good friend," said François Paty mildly, "let me go, if you do not want to kill me. Come," added he, after having succeeded in tearing himself from the enlacements of extravagant gratitude, "what have you to say about surprise and gratitude? As to surprise, I doubt whether yours can be equal to mine."

"Ah! monsieur le curé, you have overwhelmed me!" cried the worthy fellow, endeavouring to carry to his lips the hand of the pastor,—a homage which the other resisted.

"Overwhelmed you with what?" asked the curé. "For goodness' sake, my dear friend, explain yourself more clearly; for at present I don't understand a word you say."

"It is, notwithstanding, very clear," replied the vicar, examining himself complacently from head to foot, and turning round with the innocent coquetry of a young girl trying on her first ball-dress before her mother.

"Good God!" cried out all at once François Paty, whose attention this manœuvre had succeeded in fixing; "what do I see?—a new surplice! *Tu quoque, mi fili!*"

"You see it, monsieur le curé," resumed the vicar, embracing him afresh, but with a little less warmth. "You see it; I clothed myself in your gifts to come and thank you for them."

"By my faith, it is a new surplice," repeated the curé, walking round his vicar. "Verily, surplices, albs, and cassocks come in showers to-day! It is like the manna in the wilderness! Look here," said he, pointing to the objects spread upon the bed; "see what I have found on entering my chamber. I assure you, my

friend, you owe me no thanks; I am as much astounded as yourself at such a strange adventure."

"How, monsieur le curé, is it not you?"

"No, no, my friend, I can safely affirm it; and I should believe in a second miracle, if we were not, you too young, and I too unworthy, for it to be supposed that God had deigned to perform miracles in our favour,—unless, indeed, the good Saint-Sylvain, touched with our trouble, may not have warmly interceded for us," added he, shaking his head.

"May it not more likely be the good Martha and Mademoiselle Catherine?"

"You forget, my friend, that the two poor creatures are not in a condition even to give a little collation to monseigneur and the ministers who will be here within an hour. I must even confess to you, that notwithstanding my new cassock and your superb surplice, I am still in a serious embarrassment. To tell the truth, I really don't know how we shall get through the affair. A repeat of three covers, when we have not even tablecloths and plates! I yesterday reckoned upon Claude's fishing, and the unlucky boy only brought home two gudgeons and a bleak. The splendour of your surplice and the style of my cassock will only render the indigence of our table the more conspicuous. You know the proverb, my friend, 'breeches of velvet and a belly-full of bran;' I very much fear monseigneur will remember it to-day."

Thus spoke the good curé, walking about in his chamber, and stopping from time to time before some prints pasted here and there upon the white walls. He had been occupied a few instants in contemplating a Saint-Catherine, which appeared to smile upon him, when the vicar, who was standing in the embrasure of a window, all at once uttered a loud cry.

"What is the matter now?" asked François Paty. And turning round he saw his vicar standing motionless, with his hands clasped, in an ecstatic attitude, completely absorbed by what was passing without. He approached the window, which looked out upon the terrace of the cure, and leaning forward to ascertain what it was that so took the attention of the young Levite, he, in his turn, uttered a loud cry, and then remained in mute ecstasy before the spectacle which presented itself to his eyes.

And this was, indeed, the most marvellous spectacle at which François Paty could, at this moment, have wished to be present. If he had seen the good Saint-Sylvain himself appear in the court of the presbytery, he would not have been more astonished, more ravished, more delighted. Only to suppose that under the dome

of the great chestnut-trees with which the terrace was planted, was a long table, formed, it is true, of planks supported by tressles and bricks, covered and concealed by a beautiful damask table-cloth, the folds of which fell gracefully to the ground. In the centre, in full dignity, majestically arose a colossal pâté, flanked by two carps, with scales glittering like an azure cuirass. The plate glittered by the side of each cover; and here and there, in the midst of the flowers with which the tables were loaded, appeared, like little pyramids, a number of long-necked decanters. At the same time a very unusual perfume ascended from the kitchen of Martha, and mingled very agreeably with the balmy emanations of a fresh May morning. After several minutes of silence, the curé and his vicar, by a simultaneous impulse, sank into each other's arms, and remained for some time in a close embrace.

At this moment Catherine entered her uncle's chamber, smiling, and dressed in her best.

"Come, my beloved child, come to my arms!" cried François Paty, drawing her gently to his bosom; "for it is to thee, I am sure, to thee, lovely child, we owe all these surprises and enchantments!"

Then the little maiden, who wept with joy to see the joy of her uncle, began to relate, with a charm always new, how, having learnt the return of the Comte des Songères, she had gone to the Château de Bigny, and in what manner she had been met in the park by a young man, handsome as an angel, who must be a king's son.

"I knew, my dear girl," said the curé, "that you were gone to try to collect assistance at the Château de Bigny, but I did not know that the comte had returned. The Comte des Songères!" added he, as if reflecting, and speaking to himself, "it is twenty years ago this winter—cruel anniversary and fatal remembrance!"

"You know M. des Songères, uncle, then, do you?" asked the little fairy.

"But little, my child. I came to the country just as he was leaving it. But, my Catherine, this handsome young man, whom you take for the son of a king, may he not simply be the son of M. des Songères?"

"His name is Roger," replied Catherine.

"That is he—that is his son," added the old pastor, relapsing into his reverie.

"Do you know him, uncle?"

"I only saw him once, and he was then but a child. So, my dear girl, it is this young Roger who has come to our aid, is it?"

His beautiful and noble mother told me that she would leave him, on her departure, her heart, her soul, and her whole life."

"You knew his mother, then, uncle?"

"Yes, my child," replied François Paty, whose eyes moistened at the recollection of some sad event; "she was a martyr on earth, and has been for twenty years an angel in heaven!"

"Is it true, uncle, what people say?—is it true that the count caused the death of his wife?—that he killed her with grief?"

"My daughter," replied the curé sadly, "there are here below many griefs and many miseries. It is not without reason that this earth is called the vale of tears."

The conversation was at this point—and the little maiden, who felt her curiosity singularly awakened, was desirous of continuing it, when a cloud of black robes seemed to fall all at once in the court of the presbytery. These were the ministers of the neighbouring parishes, who, having set out together from one point, where they had assembled, arrived at the same moment at the cure of Saint-Sylvain. François Paty hastened to receive them, and to offer a glass of good cider to each; whilst Catherine returned to the church to complete the decking of the altar. While crossing the place, she was admired by all the peasants, who had never seen her so pretty, so cheerful, and so smart. And she did look charming in her dress of white muslin; her blue sash with its flowing ends; her large black eyes, which sparkled from beneath their silky lashes; and her plaited hair, under the weight of which her slender neck appeared to bend like a stalk surcharged with flowers. She found Claude waiting for her at the door of the church, beneath the mossy tiles of the porch.

"How beautiful you are, Catherine!" cried the poor youth, contemplating her with an anxious and jealous look.

"It is you that are handsome!" said the girl, smiling.

"Do you think so?" asked Claude.

"Yes, you look very well so," replied the little fairy, pulling down a little the immense collar which stuck up to his ears. "Only," added she, "you should persuade your father to buy you a new waistcoat; for this has been too short these two years."

"That is true," said Claude, endeavouring but in vain to elongate the sleeves of his vest, and looking with confusion at his large red hands and bony wrists.

"Your trousers are too short likewise," added Catherine.

"Indeed they are," said Claude, looking sadly down at his Cyclopean feet and his formidable ankles, which his trousers left exposed. "Yes," added he, with tears in his eyes, "I am ugly; but I love you, and am devoted to you. I have great feet and

along legs; but they serve me to follow you along the hedges, when you go alone on Annette. I have large hands; but they were once useful in defending you."

"Well," said Catherine, with a tone of mild reproach, "and don't I love you too? For some time past you have appeared in a strange humour. Come and help me strew the roses upon the steps of the altar, and try to do your best to-day at the lutrin."

At these words they both hastily entered the rustic temple, which the sun now illumined with all his splendour.

In the mean while the first bell for mass had sounded, and the crowd, which had been stationed from the morning on the Place, began to flow slowly into the house of God. The elder Noirel was lighting the wax candles. The vicar walked this way and that, never tired of drawing admiration to his new surplice, with which the congregation, in fact, appeared quite astonished. Little Jean was radiant with joy beneath his red calotte and in his new singing-boy's robe, which Catherine had bought for him. Claude stood by the lutrin, pitching his voice in an under-tone. Kneeling amidst the poor of the village, the little maiden, whilst praying with fervour, could not help casting round a glance to see if anything were wanting in the order of the festival. Monseigneur de Limoges had sent word by his grand vicar that he should arrive at the hour of divine service, and should alight at the door of the church. At ten o'clock, then, at the last bell for mass, every one was at his post. The sacred inclosure overflowed with the faithful. The rough caps of the place had invaded the benches of the fabric. There was but one empty bench; but that had been so for more than twenty years: it was that of the seigneurs of the country. The choir and the altar were still vacant. Francois Paty, his vicar, all the ministers, and even little Jean, censer in hand, were ranged round a rural dais, awaiting, beneath the porch, the arrival of the prelate. It was, without, one of those spring days which add so much splendour and so many perfumes to the poetry of religious solemnities. The mosses and lichens covered the thatched roofs, the honey-suckles and elders exhaled their sweet scents, the sun inflamed the windows, the heavens smiled on the earth, and the joyous swallows traced large circles around the belfry.

There was all at once a movement in the assembly immediately suppressed—all looks were turned towards the door—all hearts beat at once. A carriage with a pair of horses had stopped before the porch; Monseigneur de Limoges descended from it, followed by his two vicars-general. Francois Paty advanced a few steps, and having placed himself between the dais and the prelate,—

"Monseigneur," said he, with touching *bonhomie*, "by deigning to visit our poor parish, you prove that you are, upon earth, the representative of the adorable God who chose a manger for a cradle. Enter, monseigneur, this humble church; you will see kneeling, on your passage, worthy, laborious, patient, resigned people, loving their neighbours, helping each other, serving God in the simplicity of their hearts, and who will retain all their lives a pious remembrance of the grace of your presence. The Saint-Sylvain will henceforth be a double festival for this hamlet; for, from this day forth, monseigneur, you will take place in our hearts by the side of the saint we venerate."

Such was the harangue of François Paty. If we know no better, it is because we know none shorter.

"Monsieur le curé," replied the bishop kindly, "it is my duty to visit the parishes of my diocese. This duty is dear to my heart: I perform it with love; and yet I wish you to know, François Paty, that it is to you in particular that my visit is addressed; it is upon you alone must fall the little honour that belongs to it. I have long since known your worth; and as you have constantly refused the more elevated posts that I have offered you, I wished, by coming to see you in the seclusion of this country, to give a striking evidence of the esteem in which I hold your virtues and your labours."

"Monseigneur," said the good pastor, who had melted into tears, "I am rewarded beyond my humble merits. It appears to me as if I had just heard the word of the good God, which said to me, 'François Paty, I am content with you.'"

"Yes, François Paty, yes, my worthy friend, the good God is content with you," added the bishop, giving him his ring to kiss.

After this little scene, which singularly affected the congregation, monseigneur passed under the dais, and advanced processionally between two hedges of joined hands and prostrated brows, preceded by the vicar bearing the cross, Father Redigois holding the banner of Saint-Sylvain, and little Jean, who walked backwards, incensing with much grace. Instead of that horrible colophane which is generally burnt in the shape of incense in churches, and even in cathedrals, Catherine had formed the poetic idea of putting field flowers into the censer; so that at every wave given by little Jean there fell under the steps of the bishop some odour-yielding plant or other. When the cortège arrived at the chair, monseigneur seated himself at the left of the altar in a fauteuil, over which the dais had just been fastened; and then the service began.

Let the romancer suspend his task at the foot of altars! We should fear, by touching them, to profane their sacred mysteries; and yet, in our office of a faithful historian, we must relate a little incident which was near disturbing the celebration of the holy mass.

Everything was going on as well as possible. The wax candles did not melt too fast; the little bell was not too much cracked; little Jean did not manœuvre too unskilfully, and did not entangle himself too frequently in the folds of his new robe. As to Claude, he covered himself with glory. It was observed among the congregation that he had never sung in so extraordinary a manner. At the "Kyrie Eleison" he contrived to surpass himself. It might have been said that, instead of a lutrin and two singers, there was a battery of cannon in the church loaded with mitraille. Sometimes his full, majestic voice pealed like thunder beneath the rafters of the roof; and then, terrible and deep, it roared like a torrent in an abyss; at other times it burst forth like a bomb, and threatened to carry away the roof. At one time this magic voice exhibited such development that all eyes were turned upon young Noirel, and the congregation began to look at him with a sentiment of admiration, mingled with the terror which is felt by seeing a rope-dancer on a cord, with an abyss beneath his feet. But the brave and worthy Claude, without allowing himself to be intimidated by the looks of the congregation, and anxious to merit the praises of Catherine, was redoubling his force and energy; his voice was still ascending, and the honest lad was about to achieve the highest honour ever obtained by a parish singer, when, all at once—oh, bitter derision of fate! oh, vicissitudes of the lutrin! oh, fatality without example!—he was about, we say, to reach the point of his ambition, and plant the columns of Hercules of the human voice, when all at once there escaped from him what might have been called a hoarseness or gasp. Alas! not one of those slight gasps which glide away easily between the reeds of the shore; it was one of those monstrous breaks-down which suffice to ruin the future and the reputation of a man. Claude turned pale, his brow was covered with an icy perspiration, and his father was obliged to finish the hymn his son had commenced.

What could it be? What had happened? Had some malignant genius, with crooked fingers and nails of iron, traitorously grasped the throat of this intrepid singer, who, till that moment, had never failed? Had some wanton fly, by introducing itself into that sonorous throat, produced that fatal break-down? Had God, who places a limit to all things, said to the voice

of Claude, "So far shalt thou go, and no further?" Or, simply had Claude, who had eaten nothing since the preceding evening succumbed beneath one of those sudden weaknesses to which fasting exposes the best-seasoned and most robust constitution! Nothing of all this. Claude, who believed Roger to be leagues off, had all at once recognized the features of that young man, who sat on the bench formerly occupied by his family, and the unhappy young man felt himself fascinated, as the nightingale is by the eyes of the basilisk. Such was the cause of the breakdown, which was talked about long after in the parish.

In fact, a few minutes after the *Introit*, a handsome young man—tall, slender, graceful, simply but elegantly dressed—was seen to cross the nave with a reverent step, and gain the seigniorial bench. It was Roger, who was not a little surprised, on turning towards the detonations of the voice of young Noël, to recognize the cunning rogue who, a few days before, had sent him to La Hachère from Saint-Sylvain. Although the congregation was generally very pious and respectful, we are bound to confess that it showed itself on this occasion to be tolerably inattentive,—first, on account of the presence of monseigneur, whose violet cassock, violet camail, violet gloves, and violet stockings, excited almost as much curiosity as respect; then, thanks to Roger, whom nobody knew, and who was not long in drawing general attention upon himself. Catherine was the only one who had not yet observed him, when little Paquerette pulled her softly by her dress, and said in a low voice,—

"Mademoiselle! mademoiselle! look yonder at that handsome gentleman; it is the one who gave me all that money the other day."

The little maiden raised her eyes, and blushed like a Provence rose on seeing Roger. Thrown into strong light by a sunbeam which fell directly on his fair head, Roger seemed to have the radiant brow of an archangel. Catherine contemplated him for a few seconds, and, with a palpitating bosom, cast her eyes down upon her mass-book.

Pale, silent, motionless, his head down, but his nose turned up,—for, whatever position or whatever attitude Claude took, he was destined to have his trumpet nose always looking towards heaven,—the son of the churchwarden devoured his shame and humiliation in silence. But, good heavens! what became of him when he saw Catherine rise with her collecting-purse in her hand? When the little maiden collected on a Sunday, at mass, it entered into the duties of Claude to precede her, crying at every step, "For the repairs of the church!" and more

frequently, "For the poor of the parish, if you please!" Until this day he had considered this task as a pleasure and an honour; this time, in presence of Roger, under the eyes of that elegant and handsome young man, the poor lad vaguely understood that he was going to play the part of a simpleton. It must, however, be gone through. Upon a sign from Catherine, Claude rose up, redder than a peony, and stalked before the little maiden, pushing aside the crowd, and crying, from time to time, but in a faint, smothered voice, "For the poor of the parish, if you please!" When arrived at the bench where Roger sat, he would have wished to have sunk a hundred feet into the earth. The sweet girl held out her purse with a smile, and the young gentleman dropped a piece of gold into it.

After the *Te missa est*, monseigneur was conducted to the presbytery with the usual ceremony. From that moment the worthy prelate exhibited a kind benevolence, mingled with a familiarity that was quite charming. He visited the cure, appeared quite enchanted with the perfume of order and propriety that respired there, addressed kind words to all the ministers, chatted with the vicar, complimented Claude upon his style of singing at the lutrin, and then, on seeing the little maiden whom François Paty presented to him,—

"Long ago," said he, "and frequently, have I heard speak of this amiable and pious child. I see in you, my dear daughter, the benignant angel of the country. Continue," added he, patting her blushing cheeks with his white and dimpled hand, "continue to edify your neighbours by your good example, for nothing is more acceptable to God than grace and youth sanctified by piety and virtue."

We can imagine with what a charming reverence the pretty girl replied to monseigneur.

In the mean time, the young vicomte, after a stroll through the village, was preparing to remount his horse, which he had fastened near the porch of the church to an iron ring fixed in the wall, when he saw François Paty hastening towards him, he having escaped for an instant, and learnt from Catherine that the son of the Comte des Songères had been present at divine service, and must still be in the hamlet.

"Monsieur," said the good pastor; but, interrupting himself immediately, he stood in mute contemplation of him, his eyes filled with tears, which rolled silently down his cheeks. "Pardon me," resumed he at length, with emotion; "I came to thank you, and, on beholding you, I have not been able to restrain my tears. Good God, can it be you, whom, as an infant, I have held in my

arms? Yes, indeed, the good God tells me it can, for you are the living picture of your mother."

"You knew my mother, then?" said the young man, agitated in his turn.

"She was as fair to look on and as good as you," said François Paty, taking both Roger's hands in his own. "But, monsieur, you must not leave us thus. You must take a seat at the table covered with your kindnesses; your presence there will be an additional benefit."

At these words he drew Roger with him,—he, on his part, not making any great resistance. On seeing him approach, Catherine felt her heart beat softly, and Claude, who had his mischievous trick on his conscience, slunk behind his father. Roger, however, had the good taste to bow to him, and showed no appearance of knowing him. And now Martha, with a face illumined as much with joy as by her kitchen fire, came to announce that the collation was ready. Conducted by François, monseigneur very willingly passed to the terrace, followed by a numerous *cortège*. To see Catherine and Roger amidst all these black gowns, they might be supposed a couple of pretty white pigeons, surrounded by a flight of crows. The two young people placed themselves by the side of each other, to the great displeasure of Claude, who found himself banished to the end of the table, between the vicar and the churchwarden.

The repast was animated by a mild gaiety, which was not at all suppressed by the presence of the prelate. It is to be observed, in general, that nothing is more cheerful or more charming than these meetings of country curates. Pure and serene hearts make minds joyous and content: there is almost always concealed under those austere robes much grace and pleasantness, which would not at first be suspected, and which it is a surprise to discover. Monseigneur ate with a good appetite, and did honour to the vines of the Château de Bigny, without troubling himself to inquire how the poor François Paty, with his eight hundred francs of revenue, had contrived to offer him such a sumptuous gala. In this, all superiors are the same; the great never suspect the embarrassment they cause to the humble when they do them the honour to sit at their table; and it would never enter their heads to say to themselves that the wine which reddened their glass, and the slice of pâté they have on their plates, have cost months of privation, days of pain, and perhaps nights without sleep.

"Well, gentlemen, you see," said the prelate, carefully removing the bones from a slice of carp which François Paty had

st helped him to, "some among you complain of the poor manner in which they are received; here is, however, the curé Saint-Sylvain, who, with his eight hundred francs a year, finds means to enrich the poor and give us a really royal banquet."

"Monseigneur," replied the old pastor smiling, "it is because the God we adore is the God of miracles, the good and all-powerful God, who knows, when He deigns to will so, how to change water into wine, load the apostles' nets with fish, and multiply loaves to feed a crowd in the desert."

Monseigneur smiled, swallowed a glass of Bordeaux, had the appearance of understanding, and did not understand. The ministers, who had gained a keen appetite by their walk from their respective cures, vied with each other in plying a good wife and fork. The churchwarden *devoured*—yes, that is the word. On his part the vicar did not do amiss. Claude alone would not eat. He kept a sad and jealous eye on Roger and Catherine, who chatted cheerfully together; he was in agony at seeing them both so handsome, and felt strongly disposed to weep. It was in vain his father kicked him under the table, hispering, "Eat, you idle fellow; it costs nothing." Claude shook his head, sighed, but did not eat.

The collation was prolonged to the first toll for vespers. Monseigneur rose from the table to repair to the church, where he confirmed all who desired it. This done, the prelate got into his carriage and departed, with his prancing horses, after having embraced François Paty, pinched Catherine's cheek, and blessed *en masse* the whole commune kneeling on his passage.

An hour after, Roger departed likewise, at a smart trot, delighted with his day, and promising himself to return soon to that cure where he had for the first time experienced the joys of a heart, and heard speak of his mother.

"We shall meet again," said the good pastor, who had accompanied him to the end of the village, "we shall often meet again. It is the wish of my heart," added he, taking his hand; "know likewise that it is the will of your sainted mother, who is in heaven."

By ten o'clock, all Saint-Sylvain was in repose. Catherine and Claude alone were watching. The little maiden was dreaming, leaning on her elbow at her open window,—Claude was bathing his pillow with his tears.

"Oh, my God!" said he in bitter despair—"God, who has made them so handsome, why have you made me so ugly?"

In the mean time, Roger pursued slowly the road which led from Saint-Sylvain to the Château de Bigny. It was a charming night. The stars shone in the firmament; the moon enlightened his way; and Roger at the same time heard the nightingale singing in the hedges and love and liberty in his soul.

CHAPTER VI.

PRATTLE, LOVE, AND VENGEANCE.

SAINT-SYLVAIN and the presbytery had resumed their accustomed course and life. Every one had returned to his duties and his labours: François Paty to his flock, Claude to his class, where for some time he had supplied the place of his father, Catherine to her embroideries, and good Martha to the cares of her household. The vicar had folded up his magnificent surplice; the curé had done the same with his new cassock, his ferret-silk stockings, and his shoes with silver buckles. Thanks to little Jean the copper candlesticks which decorated the altar had returned to their green serge case. Barefooted, her hair like a bush, her switch in her hand, and her gown half-way up her legs, little Paquerette was driving, as she was wont, her grunting herd along the roadsides. In appearance nothing was changed; but by looking closer, it might have been easily discovered that this great day which we have seen shine so splendidly over Saint-Sylvain, had left in two hearts of our acquaintance, lively and profound traces. Without speaking of Roger, and confining ourselves here to the village, we may be understood as speaking of the little maiden, and the churchwarden's son.

Claude had never got over the horrible break-down which had so fatally interrupted him at the moment of his triumph. He knew that it was talked about in the country; and he did not conceal it from himself that his career at the lutrin might suffer from it, supposing even that it was not already injured by it. Many were envious of Claude; his education, his social position, the presumed wealth of his father, the familiarity of terms he was upon with the little maiden, the generally accredited opinion that he

was one day to marry her, and that it was solely to bless him that this flower of grace was developing itself and blooming,—all this caused Claude to reckon more than one enemy among the youth of the commune, and made him in general not looked upon favourably. For the malevolence which had till then sought in vain for wherewithal to exercise itself upon, it may be judged what a god-send must have been that frightful break-down which choked the throat of Claude. The young fellows who envied him did not hesitate to declare that he had quite disgraced himself; the young girls who secretly wished him ill for neglecting them in order to watch the little fairy could not help observing that for some time Claude had singularly fallen off. We, ourselves, alas! we are obliged to admit that, the following Sunday, intimidated by the recollection of such a disaster, he sang the vespers in a fashion to rejoice the malignant, and that the disinterested part of the audience had a right to demand of him what was become of that voice which, during two years and more, had had no rivals.

It was neither pride nor vanity that affected him; the glories of this world occupied but very little that wounded heart, agitated by far other cares. From the moment he saw at the gates of Bigny Roger holding in his hand Catherine's little foot, to assist her to mount Annette, Claude had lost the repose of his soul; from the day of Saint-Sylvain that secret uneasiness which he had already experienced had changed into a malady, which was not the less painful for not being defined. It was like an invisible arrow which he carried in his side—the more he struggled to get rid of it, the deeper the arrow penetrated into the wound. On whatever side he turned, everywhere and always he beheld the face of the young and handsome Roger smiling at Catherine; and the poor lad writhed with despair beneath the sense he entertained of his own ugliness. The idea that this young man was henceforth to have free access to the cure, that he might return, and that he would return at his pleasure,—this idea allowed him neither truce nor peace, and what he suffered cannot be expressed; for it was not love he felt for Catherine, it was adoration, a simple adoration,—allow us the word, a religious adoration. With a gesture the little maiden could have sent him to the end of the world; it is no exaggeration to say that he would have allowed himself to be hacked to pieces for her sake; we are not quite certain that he had never kissed the prints of her footsteps. He loved her as they love who know how to love; unknown to himself, without comprehending anything about it, without telling her of it, without confessing it to himself.

only she was his life; and in the same manner that we, in tempestuous weather, feel the influences of the atmosphere without thinking, for the most part, to explain to ourselves the phenomenon of the rarefaction of the air, in the same way Claude, since Roger had appeared, suffered and was agitated without too deeply seeking to know why. It may easily be supposed that the manner in which he superintended his class partook something of the state of his mind; if it happened to him in these days of trouble to take the A's for the B's, let much be pardoned him, because he loved much. Sometimes he fell into a black revery of which his pupils took advantage to put out their tongues at him, and play him tricks; sometimes, with his ear on the listen, his eye on the watch, if he heard the foot of a horse, if he saw a shadow pass, he rushed out of the school-room, and most frequently on re-entering, he found the forms empty, the young rogues having hastened to decamp and disperse pell-mell along the hedges. That which proves how much the preoccupations of love are incompatible with the duties of the professorship is, that when grown up, all these little blackguards became remarkable for their ignorance, and that there is at Saint-Sylvain, thanks to the distractions of young Noirel, a whole generation incapacitated for reading one of the fine things which are now printed; all good sort of people otherwise, and who never speak of Claude but with respect and gratitude.

Now, whilst the heart of our friend Claude was groaning like an owl in its solitary hole, the heart of our little fairy chirped and warbled like a nest of chaffinches in a hawthorn hedge in bloom. There are souls whom the first attacks of love incline towards melancholy, and with whom, on awaking, life and happiness have tears for first smiles; but for Catherine,—for that amiable and vivacious nature, it had been like one of those cheerful rays of the morning which give the signal for the fêtes of creation, and fill the valleys, the woods, and the hills with a thousand pleasing cries. But, pray who told us that she loved, child as she was? Certes, to observe her nobody would have recognised in her the symptoms of the strange malady we call love. Up with the dawn, more fresh and more ruddy than Aurora, she at once enlivened the whole house with her petulant joy, her lively spirits, and her active grace. It was like the awakening of a beehive or an aviary. She was seen everywhere at once—in the yard, in the garden, on the terrace, at the window, bounding and light, running by turns to her uncle and her nurse, like one of those pretty tropical birds which are always in motion, and at night sleep in the calyx of a rose. She accompanied her good uncle

when he went out in the morning, according to his custom, to read his breviary in the fields. They both strayed along by-paths, François Paty reading, and the little fairy pulling him every minute by the cassock, to show him either a feature of the landscape, an effect of light upon the foggy sides of the hills, or a daisy or a buttercup by the roadside. The pastor gave way kindly to all these fancies, closing his book without a murmur. He knew that to admire God and bless Him in the wonders He has created is both to pray to Him and to glorify Him. François Paty had known his niece from her childhood nearly such as we see her now; and yet, since the Saint-Sylvain he could not help remarking in her more joyousness and animation. The worthy man congratulated himself upon this, and sometimes said to the father Noirel,—

“The visit of monseigneur has already brought forth good fruits; for, since she received the sacrament of confirmation, my dear child appears to have increased in grace, attractions, and enchantments of all kinds. They call her the little fairy in the country round; and truly that name well becomes her, from the influence the little magician exercises upon all. Can you fancy anything in the world more charming? If it were possible for God to become dull in His glory, He would rejoice at beholding this darling creature. I have always said she was a blessing from Heaven; but I am compelled to confess that the sacrament of the confirmation has fecundated all the precious germs deposited in her young heart. The visit of monseigneur has been for Catherine like one of those days of bright sun and warm breezes which em-purple the peaches of our espaliers, and render golden the grapes upon our trellises.”

To which father Noirel replied,—

“Would to God, monsieur le curé, I could say as much of my son! It appears as if the Saint-Sylvain had passed over him like an April frost over the buds of my orchard. Is it not strange that everything belonging to that holy day has been fatal to my Claude? You heard what a break-down the unfortunate lad made in the mass, after having only succeeded in catching a bleak and two gudgeons in the Creuse. But that is not all: from that day, which I dare not call fatal, because it was sanctified by the presence of monseigneur, I no longer know my son; and I am in the position of a man who, having planted rose-trees and pinks in his parterre, sees nothing flourish but nettles and burdocks. Where I have sown good grain I reap nothing but tares. Claude is sad, his voice is failing, and his nose turns up more than ever. Whilst your niece grows more handsome, whilst her cheeks reddens

and become velvety as peaches in autumn, my son's fall away, and his brow is as wrinkled as a medlar in straw. If it be true to say, monsieur, that you are the happiest of uncles, it is but a just to avow that I am the most unfortunate of fathers. If I am forced to admit," he added, one day, "that the presence of monseigneur has brought sweet fruits to your roof, you must, on your part, admit that I have gathered from it none but sadly bitter fruits."

"My friend, my dear friend!" cried the curé, "do not speak thus; it would be an impiety to suppose that the passage of monseigneur can have been signalized by anything but benefits. I acknowledge that on the eve of Saint-Sylvain Claude was not very fortunate in his fishing, and that on seeing him draw from his pocket a bleak and two gudgeons I could not suppress a sensation of stupor and consternation; I also acknowledge that at the mass there escaped from him that which you call, I believe, a breakdown, and that this, absorbed as I then was by the celebration of divine service, struck me with terror; for an instant I thought the roof was cracking and the steeple was about to tumble upon our heads. But, my friend, these are little accidents, which are of no importance to the glory of God or to the happiness of man, and which it is not in the province of bishops to avert. As to the melancholy of our brave Claude, let us see," added François Paty, scratching his ear, "may it not be some little affair of the heart, some uneasiness belonging to youth? Noirel, we will speak of this again. Our two children have grown and been brought up together; it is my opinion that God will bless their union. They are poor, but, thank Heaven, they have ready dowries which they will bring each other,—youth, health, piety, a love of order, and a disposition for work. Believe me, my good friend, this is all that is necessary to begin housekeeping with, and that thousands begin with less."

To speak frankly, nothing of this kind preoccupied the heart and mind of the little maiden. When the middle of the day came, and she had trotted about hither and thither all the morning, alert, lively, brisk, and her mouth blooming with an ever-ready smile, Catherine went up to her chamber, and sat down to her embroidery, whilst Martha sat spinning beside her. Then came the endless chat, in which the name of Roger constantly recurred. They began by passing in review all the details of monseigneur's visit; then by degrees appeared the fair, handsome young man, who soon finished by invading and occupying the whole scene. Martha, who had only had a glimpse of him, was, nevertheless, possessed by a passionate liking for him, particularly on account

of the three geese and the two carp he had sent—such geese and carp as Martha declared she had never seen the like of. Besides, it is fair to add that she had not been insensible to a few gracious words Roger had addressed to her, as he stopped before her kitchen. You should have heard them both chatting and prattling away, one plying the needle and the other the spindle.

“What a history!” said Catherine; “if I were to live a thousand years I should remember it to my last hour. They call me the little fairy; but, in good truth, would not one say it was one of those fairy tales with which you amused my childhood? Listen now:—

“There was once upon a time a village curé, so poor, so poor, so poor, that he had neither stockings nor cassock, and that his niece was obliged to go begging over the hills and valleys for the poor of the pastor’s flock. One day it happened that, thinking to make an appeal to a good and charitable nobleman, the niece of the poor curé strayed into the domains of an ogre, dreaded ten leagues round. Fortunately, on that day, the ogre was absent, but his steward, who was not much better than his master, pitilessly drove away the little beggar; who departed, shedding scalding tears, because her uncle had no cassock, and there was nothing at home for supper. She was weeping thus when the son of a king came past;—”

“Yes,” said Martha, taking up the tale, “and the son of the king, struck, ravished, astonished at the freshness, grace, and beauty of this sweet creature,—”

“No, no,” said Catherine, “that is not it;—but ‘touched by the tears which fell in abundance down her cheeks, he begged her to wipe her eyes, and tell him the cause of her grief; which the niece of the curé did, drying her tears with the corner of her apron. After having listened to her,—”

“With admiration,—” interrupted Martha.

“No, but ‘with kindness,’” cried Catherine, taking up warmly the thread of the narrative, “‘the king’s son—”

“Suddenly enchanted,” continued Martha, “‘with such charms and grace,—”

“What nonsense?” said the little maiden, laughing; “would you make me believe that the king’s son would fall suddenly in love with the niece of a poor village curé?”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Martha, turning her spindle between her fingers; “things never fall out otherwise in fairy tales. ‘After having listened to her with admiration, the king’s son, suddenly smitten with such beauty and grace, hastened to send by one of his pages, to the beautiful girl’s old nurse, the

three whitest geese of his poultry-yard, and the two largest can in his preserves; then having taken the beautiful girl by the hand, he conducted her to the king, his father, who married them, and they lived long and happy, and had——,”

“Dear, dear,” cried Catherine, “I have broken my needle!”

“And they had many——,”

“Nonsense!” said Catherine, putting her head out at the open casement; “there is Claude coming out of his door,—I can see nothing but his nose though, yet. Tell me, Martha, did you ever observe Claude’s nose?”

“And they had many——,”

“Oh, cease your fairy tales!” cried the little maiden, rising to fetch another needle from her pincushion; “you see all this is not common-sense. How can you fancy that the king, who does not know the niece of the curé, and who sees her for the first time, should go and give her his son in marriage? It would be quite certain that that monarch would first make some inquiries; and, besides, we wish to make a fairy tale of it, and it is precisely the fairy who is wanting in our tale.”

“Not at all,” said Martha; “the fairy won’t be wanting.”

“Where do you see her, then, nurse?”

“Why I see her, my darling, seated in your chair,” said Martha, looking at Catherine with a smile.

Whilst they thus chatted in all innocence, the flax twisted itself around the spindle, and the flowers of a blank bloomed out into relief upon the piece of canvas Catherine held between her fingers. The little maiden sat working in the embrasure of a window, and—a subject for eternal distractions for poor Claude—her head, half concealed by convolvuluses and sweet-peas, could be seen from without. In one of the corners of the casement there was a nest of swallows, and the brood, newly hatched, mingled their little cries with the babble of the two women. In the mean time, some little urchins, still too young to attend Claude’s lessons, were playing under the church porch; the vicar was crossing the Place with a business air; little Jean was ringing the bell, either for the *Angelus*, some death, or some baptism; a farmer of the neighbourhood was trotting through the village on his nag; and now and then a beggar might be seen, bending beneath his years and his wallet, stopping at the door of the presbytery. Such were the incidents which occasionally interrupted the conversation of Martha and Catherine. But Roger was not their only subject. They spake of monseigneur, of the Saint-Sylvain, and of all that related to that great day; but these were nothing but so many windings to come back to the young and handsome vicomte, who

had, besides, played too important a part in that history not naturally to absorb all the poetic part and the romantic interest of it; for it must be acknowledged that this young man, without thinking of it or wishing it, had proved a sad rival to Monseigneur de Limoges, and that in reality it was he who proved to be the hero, the lion of the fête.

"Now, only remember," said Catherine sometimes, "M. Noirel and that simpleton Claude laughed at me because I said at first that I seriously believed he was a prince of the blood. But you yourself, Martha, would you not have thought as I did? Do you think that a king's son could have shown himself more generous or more charitable? Did you ever form to yourself a more magnificent idea of a dauphin?"

"Dame! listen, then, my darling," replied Martha, a little embarrassed. "I can't say that I have seen any dauphins; but what I can well affirm is, that neither kings nor emperors have finer geese in their poultry-yards, nor finer carp in their fish-ponds."

"Oh! the geese and the carp prove nothing," said Catherine; "but did you see his hands? Only fancy, Martha, his hands are so small that Claude could hold them both in the palm of one of his; and so white—so white——"

"My darling, it is not possible that his hands could be whiter than the feathers of his geese were."

"So white," continued Catherine, "that I was envious of them as I looked at them. Did you observe his hair? When the sun shone upon it, it might be imagined waves of gold flowing along his forehead. His eyes are like two corn-bottles amidst a field of ripe wheat; his voice is as soft as the sighing of the wind among the elms; and although he speaks so kindly, and smiles so benevolently, what a proud and superb air he has!—one might declare that his brow awaited a crown. As to his shape, I really believe it is as slender as mine," added the little fairy, tightening her waist-buckle.

"Dame!" said Martha, "it cannot be denied that he is a very handsome gentleman."

"And so good!" cried Catherine, warming in her gratitude—"so good—so generous—doing good without ostentation, and with so much grace! Without him, nurse, what would have become of us? A vicar without a surplice!—a curé without an alb!—a cellar without wine!—not a silver cover for monseigneur!—not the simplest duckling to put upon the spit! Well, he provided for everything. Ah, his must be the noblest heart that ever beat under the heavens!"

"Yes," added Martha, after a few instants of silent reflection, "they were certainly the largest carp I ever saw in my life."

When he had finished his class and dismissed his pupils, whose noisy coming-out filled the hamlet with cries, wrangling, and disturbance, Claude came to take his share in these conversations, which completed the misery of his soul; for Martha and Catherine, meaning no harm, did not restrain themselves the least while expressing their sentiments before him. He retreated to a corner, and generally preserved a dogged silence, from which the little fairy had much trouble in drawing him.

"Why, Claude," said she to him, from time to time, "you are so sad! What is the matter with you, my friend?"

Then she would occasionally rise from her seat, and, approaching him quietly, bestow upon him some little familiar caress, sometimes pinching his nose, then his chin, or running her hand into his wild yellow locks. Claude took it all like a good dog, and turned upon his little friend a mild, tender, grateful look. It is a strange thing, but when he looked at Catherine in that manner, Claude was no longer ugly; his whole heart passed into his countenance; and there was in the expression of that look something so adorably good that his whole person was, as it were, transfigured by it. His brow cleared, his eyes brightened, and, by one of those miracles which it only belongs to happy love to operate, his nose seemed to sink, and insensibly take lines more correct and less tortuous. Unfortunately this was but a ray; it was but a flash, which must be hastily seized on its passage. If he caught but a glimpse of the face of Roger, however distant, Claude sunk again into his darkness; his brow contracted, his eyes became extinct in their orbits, and that devil of a nose, like the fist of Ajax defying the gods, resumed its threats towards heaven.

The evening generally gathered together, on the terrace of the cure, François Paty, the vicar, the two Noirels, Martha, and Catherine; in short, all our little world. There the conversation still turned upon Roger; for since the appearance of that young man upon the seignorial bench of the church, the Comte des Songères and his son became the principal topics in the village. All remembrances were awakened in a crowd: it was recollected that the comtesse had left a son quite a child; and the old people of the village agreed in declaring that young Roger was the living image of his mother. Martha and Noirel remembered perfectly having seen several times, on Sundays, at mass, a young lady with a pale brow, a sickly person, and eyes scalded with tears. The return of the comte had just exhumed and revived

all the reports which had prevailed formerly upon the death of his wife. François Paty, who alone knew anything about it, was extremely reserved, and spoke with great caution; but all he said excited the curiosity of Catherine to the highest extent. The amiable girl wept over the destiny of that noble creature, cut off so prematurely; and all she heard of the Comte des Songères made her tremble with fear.

In the mean time a fortnight had nearly passed away since the Saint-Sylvain, and Roger had not reappeared. Claude began to breathe freely again, and feel himself more at ease. He said to himself that the young man had doubtless set off for Germany, whence he had come; and the only regret of honest Claude was, that Germany was not at a greater distance—at the devil, or at least in the depths of Siberia. A sensible amelioration was already to be observed in him; he had just, to the great disappointment of the envious, re-seized the sceptre of the lutrin, when all at once he was obliged to own that, as it is said, he had reckoned without his host.

It was now the early days of spring. Alone in her chamber, Catherine was embroidering in her accustomed place, near the open window. Martha, who the day before had been washing, was busy in the garden hanging out her linen on the lines. It was a burning hot day: the heavens were on fire; the scorching rays of the sun fell upon the earth like floods of fused metal; the birds were silent; the flowers hung their heads upon their stalks; the creeping plants which surrounded Catherine's case-ment crackled and twisted like a vine-branch in a furnace.

Catherine herself was oppressed: for the first time in her life, perhaps, she felt sad, restless, nervous, and uneasy. She had let her embroidery slip from her hands, and with her elbow leaning on the window-sill, her white fingers buried in the plaits of her hair, she was dreaming, sweet girl, we cannot positively say of what,—the little maiden could not have told herself. What, however, is certain is, that the reverie in which our little friend had been plunged for more than an hour was very serious and very profound; for she did not even hear the gallop of a horse which stopped suddenly near the church. It was not till after a few seconds that, upon raising her pretty brown head, she perceived, in front of the presbytery, Roger, who had not yet dismounted, and who was looking at her with a smile on his countenance.

At the same time Claude, who had sprung from his school-room like a wolf from his den, stood in his doorway, with his eyes on fire, and his hair standing on end.

If I had the exalted and rare honour of being a great painter,

I would make a little picture of this, and would have a charming scene instead of an indifferent page. On one side the rustic church, with its needle-like steeple, and its porch covered with tiles, upon the brown velvet of the moss of which a band of implumaged pigeons are pruning themselves. In front the presbytery, with its window festooned with climbing plants; in the corner of it a nest of swallows, and upon the sill Catherine leaning upon her elbow, like one of those beautiful virgins whom painters of the Flemish school frame among garlands of flowers, fruits, and birds. Before the cure, on the Place, bathed in sunshine, Roger, who has let his bridle fall on the neck of his steed, contemplates with mute ecstasy the brown and pretty head; whilst the horse, covered with sweat, blows with his smoking nostrils the hot sand, to obtain a little freshness. On the opposite side to the church the village street, extending to and losing itself under a mass of elders and honeysuckles; a few hens pecking in the shade, around a proud, superb cock; upon the sill of a door Claude, jealous, and with a restless eye; and behind him, through the half-open door, a group of elfish dirty faces, watching for the departure of the master, in order to escape in their turn, and steal away along the hedges like a covey of partridges.

Whilst Catherine had been talking with Martha about the young and handsome Roger, Roger, on his side, had employed all his latter days in chatting with himself about the little fairy. The graceful image had accompanied him to his retreat; the remembrance of the peaceful pleasure he had tasted at the cure mingled itself, like a sweet perfume, with his solitary life. This had been, as we have already said, the first pleasure of the kind he had ever known or enjoyed; naturally tender, his soul had retained a happy and charming impression of it. If he had given way to the inclination of his heart, he would have returned to Saint-Sylvain the very day after the festival; but he was one of those contemplative spirits which dread nothing so much as urging on destiny, voluntarily dwell upon the first buds of passion, and enjoy with complacency the reveries of happiness. Besides, we may say of this young man, as we have said of Catherine, nothing proves that he loved; and if he did love, no one in the world could assert that he did—himself less than any other. It is, however, true that everything had changed with him, and that everything around him had assumed a new face. That ardent melancholy which we have described above, and which the silence of the fields, solitude, and liberty had developed, was transformed into a more serene and better-defined feeling; all those young faculties which we have seen agitated without aim in a void, and consume

themselves in isolation, at last had alighted and planted themselves, like a swarm of bees upon a parterre in bloom.

When, on raising her head, Catherine perceived Roger, whom she had not seen since the festival of Saint-Sylvain, by an irreflexive movement she crossed her two little hands as if to pray, and, with a smiling mouth, she remained several instants standing motionless, looking at the young man who was looking so earnestly at her; then, all at once, springing away like a gazelle, descending the staircase almost at a bound, and flew to Martha, who was busy with her linen in the garden.

"Martha! Martha!" cried she; "here is M. Roger, just arrived on horseback. Quick, nurse; set about getting dinner; for so hot as it is, the young man will not go away before nightfall, and we ought not to give him reason to think we only have dinner at the presbytery when he provides it. Do your best, my good Martha, and I will love you dearly," added she, throwing her arms round her neck, and kissing both her cheeks.

Without waiting for Martha's reply, she flew away to receive Roger, whom she found in the court-yard of the presbytery. She immediately conducted him to a large room, into which the sun only penetrated through closed blinds; then, while the young man was wiping his brow with his cambric handkerchief, she disappeared, and soon returned, holding in her hand a clean and shining plate, upon which was enthroned a large glass of cider, crowned with sparkling foam.

"I owe you my life," cried Roger, after having emptied the glass at a draught; "I thought I must have melted on the road."

"Yes," said Catherine, "you are indeed in a heat. Why did you wait for such a burning hot day as this? It has been so fine and mild lately. We expected you here, and not seeing you come, we began to think you would not come at all. You must not return during the heat," added she; "you will dine with us; my uncle will be delighted to see you. He is gone this morning to administer to a poor sick person; but we expect him back every instant."

"What were you thinking about just now, leaning on your elbow at the window?"

"I was not thinking."

"You were dreaming, then?"

"I was dreaming; but I do not know about what."

"I disturbed you."

"Oh, no; not at all. I was in low spirits; I fancy I did not

feel quite well. All at once I perceived you, and that has given me pleasure; you have been so kind to us all."

"I!" said Roger; "I have done nothing for you. It is you, on the contrary, mademoiselle, who, without suspecting it, have done everything for me. I was alone; useless to all, useless to myself, leading a wearisome, melancholy life in the seclusion of the fields. You appeared to me,—and, I know not by what enchantment, everything in my life has from that moment changed. It is here, then," added he, "that your peaceful days glide away? And, whatever be the destiny that fate reserves for me, everywhere and at all times shall I carry with me your sweet image, and shall never forget that it was under the roof inhabited by you that for the first time I heard speak of my mother."

They were at this point of their scarcely-commenced conversation, when the door opened noiselessly, and Claude, gliding along the wall like a bat, strode furtively to the side of the little maiden, who could not suppress, on seeing him, a slight movement of impatience and ill-humour. Thus the cruel girl, without thinking ill, began already to be vexed at the assiduities of her old companion. There is in love, even when just born and ere it knows itself, a natural and monstrous egotism, before which the reflective man never pauses without a feeling of terror. Look at that young and beautiful creature. She is little more than sixteen years old; grace sits upon her brow, and goodness beams in her smile. Do you know what cares that charming head has cost? She is the pride of her hearth, the joy of the house; everything is animated, rendered gay, and embellished by her presence. Her father contemplates her with adoration; the heart of her mother is nothing for her but a festive hymn; she has old friends who bless her like a second spring in their lives; and yet, let but an unknown pass, and love, like a spark, kindles by the shock of two glances. Parents, friends no longer exist; the past is reckoned as nothing, and soon, for this adored girl, the happiness and delight of her family, there is thenceforward in the world but one being—one of whom, only a few days before, she was ignorant of the name, and did not suspect the existence. I have somewhere read that love is the first chapter of the great book of ingratitude.

The presence of Claude quickly changed the tone of the conversation. They spoke of other things and other persons; of monseigneur's visit, the remembrance of which still occupied the village mind, of the heat of the day, of the dryness of the season, of the cutting of the hay, of the hopes of the harvest, and the gathering of green peas. Upon all these subjects Roger found

means to chat with intelligence, grace, and cheerfulness ; whilst Claude, standing near Catherine, mute and motionless, examined with unspeakable pain the elegant costume and the easy attitude of the young horseman ; his silken cravat tied negligently round his neck, the thousand folds of his white trousers encircling his flexible waist, the brilliant steel of his spurs, the supple, shining leather of his boots ; one of his hands gloved like that of a duchess, the other, white and delicate, playing with a smart thin cane, which Roger used as a riding-whip. Neither did one of these details any less escape the little maiden, who, without dreaming of such a thing, yielded to a charm so new to her. Claude was in pain, but he was there ! What became of him when, the door opening suddenly, he saw his august father rush into the room, with clenched hands, and pale with anger ?

"You scoundrel ! you do-nothing ! this is the way, is it, that you attend to your class ?" cried the churchwarden, seizing his son by the collar. "This is the fine example, you idle fellow, you give your pupils ! This is the way in which you justify my confidence, and that of the fathers of families ! To school, you unlucky lout, to school !" repeated he, endeavouring to drag him away.

"Father !" cried Claude, with a sullen growl.

Upon a look from his little friend, gentle and resigned as a sheep being led to the shambles, his head cast down like a dog sent back to his kennel, he wiped his eye with his sleeve, and went out with his hands in his pockets.

"Poor Claude," cried Catherine, following him with her eyes.

"I know you love him," said Roger, with a touch of jealousy.

"How can I help loving him ?" replied the little maiden. "I can scarcely name a day in which he has not given me some touching proof or other of tenderness and devotion."

"If what is said be true," rejoined Roger, "I know nobody who would not esteem himself happy to be devoted to you at that price."

"And what is said, monsieur ?" asked the little fairy.

"That Monsieur Claude is your betrothed," replied the young vicomte, "and that you are engaged to each other."

"He ! Claude my betrothed !" cried Catherine ; "poor lad !" added she quickly, with a smile.

In the tone in which these two words *poor lad* were pronounced, there was so clear a denial given to the report which prevailed in the village, that Roger started with joy ; and Catherine appeared more beautiful than ever.

At that moment the steps of Annette were heard at the door

of the presbytery, and almost immediately after, François Paty entered, and was quite delighted, as his niece had said he would be, to find Roger at the cure. He pressed his hand with affectionate cordiality; and the rest of the day glided away in tender and familiar chat. They dined gaily on the terrace. Whatever poor Martha had been able to do, the dinner was not sumptuous; but, to make up for it, their hearts were cheerful and content. Roger found everything delicious, and was loud in his praises of the buckwheat biscuits which Martha produced with the dessert, and which completely gained him the good graces of the old woman. At sunset they took a walk on the banks of the Creuse; and when the young vicomte departed for Bigny, the stars had already a long time sparkled in the ceiling of the heavens.

From that time not a week passed in which Roger did not visit the presbytery three or four times, without perceiving that he was closely watched by Master Robineau, who only sought for an opportunity of avenging himself at the same time on the young vicomte and the niece of the curé. From the first of Roger's arrival at the Château de Bigny, a smothered enmity, founded upon reciprocal antipathies, had established itself between the young vicomte and the steward. Master Robineau, it may be easily conceived, had nothing about him which would be at all agreeable to Roger; and, on his part he had not been able to witness without great dissatisfaction, the installation of this young man in the domain where he, Robineau, had for twenty years enjoyed a sovereign authority. From the day on which Roger had reprimanded him so severely for the manner in which he had permitted himself to receive the pretty collector, this discontent had assumed a more downright, clear, distinct character; in short it had become a good and fair hatred, in which the little maiden was necessarily implicated. Add to which, Robineau, making a profession to hate curés and vicars, never was more happy than when he could bark after a priest's gown, from the depths of his kennel.

Before we proceed further, we think it our duty to report here a letter which he wrote, after playing the spy for a month, to the Comte des Songères at Paris.

"MONSIEUR LE COMTE,—I should think I failed in all my duties if I did not inform you of the things, at least very strange, which have been going on in your absence. If your prompt return does not restore order, I will not answer for anything, such rapid progress is the evil making. If I had to write to you, monsieur le comte, that your woods, your farms, and your

château, were on fire, I should not be more sorry or more terrified than I am at this moment, at the terrible blow I am about to inflict upon you. To lose your lawsuit would be a trifling disaster, compared to that with which you are threatened. The priest party, that redoubtable party which envelops France like an invisible network, is represented in this country by the curé of Saint-Sylvain, an intriguing man, so much the more dangerous for concealing under an apparent bonhomie the perversity of his character. It is still the same François Paty, of whom you have, perhaps, monsieur le comte, retained some recollection: years have only served to develop the evil sides of his mind. This crafty old man, whom I suspect of belonging to the society of Jesuits, has contrived, by means of tricks and knaveries, to make himself beloved by all the country, where he exercises an unbounded influence; for, the better to conceal his game, during the twenty years he has been stationed like a bird of prey over our country, the old hypocrite baptizes, marries, and buries his parishioners for nothing. That is not all: joining immorality to hypocrisy, he has residing with him a pretended niece, who, under the pretence of collecting for the poor of the parish, goes about begging from door to door, and makes her eighteen years, her fresh complexion, and delicate shape, assist in the propagation of the faith. This little wretch is so renowned in the environs for the fatal charms which she casts around her, that she is called no other than the little fairy. This being understood, you shall see, monsieur le comte, unfolded before your eyes, the most infamous scheme ever conceived by a child of Loyola. As soon as the return of M. Roger was known at Saint-Sylvain, the odious Paty, judging with reason that he was an easy prey, began by letting loose upon monsieur, your son, his pretended niece, who came to seek him in the château itself; and did not cease till she had lured him to the cure, or, to speak more correctly, the den of her uncle. It is painful to me, monsieur le comte, to denounce a son to his father; but the Robineaus have never known anything but their duty. My noble father, who was an usher, had for his device, 'Do what is right, come of it what may.' Monsieur le comte, the priests have possessed the mind of monsieur, your son; and if you do not take care, if you do not hasten hither, they will take possession of your domains; already the château defrays the expenses of the presbytery. On the day of the patronal festival of the commune, all the black-gowns of the department, presided over by the bishop of Limoges, having assembled to guttle at the cure of Saint-Sylvain, M. Roger, in spite of my humble remonstrances, took part in these maniacal

orgies; of which, you need not doubt, you paid the expenses royally. You will not learn without great satisfaction that your wines were found exquisite; there were only three hundred bottles of them drunk. At the dessert, monsieur your son, whom they made to sit close to the little fairy, paid for the albs, surplices, and cassocks of all the vicars and curés of the diocese. Your table linen and dinner service returned in a miserable condition; I believe some of the silver spoons are missing. Add to this, monsieur le comte, ever since your son has associated with the priesthood, everything here goes wrong; and there does not pass a day in which I am not wounded by the blade of that sword, of which it is said, 'the hilt is at Rome, and the point everywhere.' Believe your respectful and devoted Robineau,—your interests are in peril; the soil is mined beneath your feet. But all this is still nothing. Faithful to the invading spirit of the Church, the audacious Paty, despairing of inducing monsieur le vicomte to despoil himself of his wealth while you live, has had recourse to his pretended niece, who plays in this affair the part of the antique siren, whose perfidious songs drew the imprudent and charmed traveller into her snares. This little hussy has manœuvred so well, that monsieur le vicomte has gone headforemost into the trap. There is nothing talked of, for ten leagues round, but the loves of the niece of the curé and the son of the Comte des Songères. The wicked rejoice; worthy people are afflicted at it; your honest Robineau, ever faithful to the glory of your house, sheds, night and day, scalding tears at it. All this, monsieur le comte, is more grave and serious than you can believe. Monsieur, your son is young, is weak; he loves, and believes himself beloved. From this to marriage is a step easily got over. The girl is well-dressed, very genteel, and otherwise does not want for attractions. She and your son are never apart; they are to be met at all times; on hills or in dales, on foot or on horseback; gliding along the hedges, like two turtle-doves. Not longer ago than last night, I saw them, with my own eyes, wandering across the fields, side by side, cooing and billing, sighing, looking at the moon, and counting the stars. The abominable Paty encourages these silly doings; and if he be allowed, there is no doubt that this Jesuitical old man is determined that the heir of your name shall lead his pretended niece to the foot of the altar illumined by the torches of Hymen.

"I have pointed out the evil to you, monsieur le comte, it is for you to find the remedy. For my part, whatever may be your determination, I shall have the consciousness of having done my

duty with that freedom and that loyalty that I have always exercised in the conducting and managing of your affairs.

“Receive, monsieur le comte, the assurance of the exalted sentiments with which I have the honour to be your faithful and devoted servant,
“CASTOR ROBINEAU.”

This bomb being once launched, Robineau rubbed his hands, and reposed himself upon the future for the care of his proper vengeance.

CHAPTER VII.

RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW.

AND yet, if there ever were beneath the heavens chaste and pure tenderesses, agreeable to God, and which angels might have envied, they certainly were those which that old scoundrel Robineau denounced so grossly to the anger of his master, knowing right well that at the name of François Paty the Comte des Songères would be mad with anger. Now, this is perhaps the best place to relate succinctly what had passed twenty years before between the curé of Saint-Sylvain and the Châtelain de Bigny.

François Paty had scarcely been in the country and taken possession of his cure six months. He soon made himself known by his good works, and already people talked at Saint-Sylvain and in the neighbourhood of his ardent charity, his evangelical tolerance, and his adorable virtues. At this period, for a long time struck with the malady which was to lead her to the tomb, the young comtesse felt the termination of her pilgrimage rapidly approaching; every day which passed bearing away a part of the wreck of her health and strength. Yet, naturally pious, and taking advantage of some remains of expiring energy, she still went, from time to time, to hear mass at the church of the commune, when her husband was absent; for the comte had forbidden his wife that supreme consolation, more pitiless than the executioner, who does not refuse the succours of religion to the

criminals he leads to punishment. This hard and cruel master necessarily hated and proscribed around him the worship of a God who came among men to console the afflicted and free the slave. It happened one Sunday, after divine service, that the comtesse was seized with such a faintness that assistance was necessary, and she was carried at once to the presbytery. The manner in which her husband behaved towards her was no mystery for anybody in the country; every one felt an interest for this beautiful and unfortunate woman. Pious sympathies were soon established between her and François Paty, who, in the first place, paid her many visits as a priest, and afterwards as a friend, thanks to the absence of the Comte des Songères, who had left the château and his wife under the care of his creature Robineau. François Paty had not only a most excellent heart, he had, as we have already said, a tender, poetical, and elevated mind. He had just seen his sister fade away before his eyes, and die at an early age. Often had he reflected on the melancholy destiny of women; often had he mourned in silence over the pale crowd of desolate shadows which pass weeping through their passage on earth. Whilst supporting her with the hope of faith, he endeavoured to revive the dying flower, drooping upon its stalk; and perhaps he might, by the help of that celestial dew which is the word of God, have recalled the sap and life, when the comte suddenly returned, like the storm which was to bend and break it. Upon a report of M. Robineau (and we have seen how M. Robineau could make a report), M. des Songères, who had always been something of an *esprit fort*, and boasted of having never knelt before a cross, or uncovered to a priest, in all haste consigned the curé of Saint-Sylvain to the door of the Château de Bigny, and brutally told his wife that he did not choose apostles of fanaticism, Jesuits, and bigots should be received under his roof. The comtesse bowed submissively to the command, and from that time François Paty could only pray for her.

At a short distance of time from this, on a winter's night, when he had just fallen asleep, the pastor was awakened by a loud knocking at the door of the presbytery. He arose and dressed himself in haste, thinking it was some sick person who stood in need of his ministry: it was the comtesse who was dying. Bearing with him the holy oils and consecrated host, François Paty set out immediately upon the horse which had been brought for him, for at that time there was no Annette.

It was an awful night; the gusts of wind, loaded with icy rain, blew with incredible violence; the heavens were black,

except when, at long intervals, the moon, piercing through the clouds, showed her wan face, and whitened the dismal landscape. The trees by the roadside assumed fantastic shapes; the birches, which quivered in their pelisses of satin, looked like white phantoms; whilst the oaks, whose bare branches clashed against each other with a sinister noise, had the appearance of immense skeletons agitated and shaken by the winds. The Creuse, which moaned at a distance, mingled its dull roar with the tumult of the tempest. The roads were scarcely practicable, and the terrified horse every moment refused to advance. François Paty prayed with fervour, and felt neither the wind nor the rain. "O my God!" said he, "grant that I may arrive in time to assist that mild and sad creature to die, whom I have not been permitted to assist to live!" At length he perceived a light on the horizon, a pale light, which added to the dismal effect of that dreary night; for, at such hours, it is only grief or sickness that watches. It was the window of the Comtesse des Songères, which beamed through the darkness like the pharos of death. François Paty urged on his horse, and soon alighted on the *perron* of the château, where a servant was waiting to introduce him to the chamber of death. Caring little for the situation of his wife, the comte had been, for two days past, at the neighbouring city; and although he had been sent for, he had not yet appeared.

The chamber into which François Paty was conducted was only lighted by the half-consumed wood of the hearth, and a single lamp, and the heavy moist atmosphere which hangs over the bed of death struck him as he entered. Stretched upon her bed, attended only by one old servant, the comtesse was motionless, and paler than the vestments which already enveloped her like a shroud. Her hair, heaped in disorder upon her pillow, threw the paleness of her face into even stronger relief. She held her hands crossed upon her breast, and it might have been believed that life had already retired from that sinking body, had not the feverish brightness of the widely-opened eyes gleamed through the shade upon the alabaster of the countenance.

The moment he entered, François Paty inquired if they had sent to the city for a physician; but, at a gesture of the comtesse, the servant retired, and the dying woman was left alone with the man of God.

"Father!" said she, in a broken voice, and turning towards him, "my last hour is come; death is here, I see him, I feel him. There is no question now of my body: about to appear

before the Eternal, I have sent for you, that I may, with you, employ my few moments with my soul."

"Oh, my daughter!" replied the pastor, who had seated himself beside her pillow, "if it be thus, may the will of God be done! but your soul stands in no need of being shown the way to heaven."

"You are deceived, you are deceived, my father!" cried the unfortunate lady, with feverish warmth; "I am not what I am thought to be. Because I have devoured my tears and stifled my sobs, I have been believed patient and resigned: I myself, alas! believed so,—and now, when I am about to pass away, I feel within me youth and life awakening again, and uttering a cry of revolt. Oh, my friend! I have suffered so much! I have suffered so much, that even my son has not given me the strength to live. I shall pass away like a shadow, but I cannot say that I have withered like the grass of the fields; the grass of our meadows fades in the sun, and not one ray has shone upon my pilgrimage. And now—torture not yet experienced!—if virtue, for all that, be but a word? if resignation be base and impious? if happiness be the only object which every creature here should aim at? Oh, happiness! love! mutual endearments! tender communings at night in the depth of woods! oaths exchanged in the splendour of clear and star-lit nights! Cruel God! if such was the fate you refused me, why have you given me a soul for all these felicities? Father! father! have pity on me; pacify my heart; deliver it, father, from the frightful desire it experiences at this awful hour, to blaspheme destiny and insult the designs of Providence."

She continued to speak thus for a long time, with the melancholy exaltation of a soul thirsting for happiness, and which, ready to quit life, turns despairing towards the shores which it sees flying and disappearing before it, without its ever having been able to approach them. Wandering, with despair and the fever which consumed her, she let loose the floods of bitterness collected within her breast; all that she had till that time concealed, the evils she had endured, the unworthy treatment she had been subjected to, the long martyrdom she had undergone,—she told all, tossing her arms, and while she spake, cursing God and man, outraging heaven and earth,—the wind sobbing at the doors, the rain beating against the windows, the weathercocks groaning on their pivots, and François Paty, with his head reclined on his breast, listened and prayed, penetrated with terror.

"My child," said he, at last, in a sad but serious voice; "if life be bad, we must not accuse God for its being so. God made

everything so that His creatures might be happy ; it is man who has misconceived His benefits and perverted the works of his Creator. I believe that, in fact, happiness is the object towards which humanity is directed and ought to aim at, under the penalty of failing in its mission ; but it is only at the expense of many trials and many sufferings that it can hope to re-enter the road which leads to it. In order to come out triumphantly from the paths of its errors, it must have, as religion has, its martyrs. Thus all who suffer, groan, and weep, concur, without knowing it, in this mysterious and divine work. There is not a cry of despair uttered which will not have a cry of joy for its echo in the future ; there is not a tear shed which will not one day cause a flower to blossom. This is why grief is holy, why tears are blessed ; for humanity is the daughter of God. Cherish then your tortures instead of cursing them. Better times will come ; you will contemplate them from the heights of eternal life, and you will leap for joy at hearing songs of love and deliverance arise in chorus from earth to heaven.

Then he sought for words of mildness to calm the tumult of that irritated soul ; he poured, drop by drop, the balm of Christian consolation upon that riven heart. As he continued to speak, peace descended by degrees into the bosom so lately filled with agitation and tempest ; the moistened eye already beamed with a less fiery brightness. Taking advantage of a favourable crisis, François Paty desired that young Roger should be brought in. As he expected, on seeing her son, whom she covered with passionate kisses, the comtesse melted into tears, and discharged her bosom of the sobs which were stifling her. They were obliged to take away the child, who, awakened suddenly from his sleep, and understanding nothing of what was passing around him, wept also, but without knowing why, and only because he saw his mother weep.

" My father ! " said she, in a voice that began to grow fainter, " I am guilty of dying. I ought to have lived for my son ; I wished to do so, but was not able. I have dried myself up with melancholy ; grief has broken my bones ; my strength has betrayed my courage. Dear and poor child ! what will become of him ? I feel with terror that I have given him my soul, and that I am about to leave him my heart ; I feel that the iron yoke which has destroyed me will weigh more heavily on that fair head. My friend, you will watch over him as much as it will be permitted you. Let him never know what I have suffered : let not my tomb stand as a barrier between his father and him. And yet, speak of me to him sometimes,—teach him to cherish my memory ! Let him know that I loved him dearly, and that he is

all that I regret in this world. You also," added she, ho out to him her dry and burning hand; "you also I regret weep for. You have been kind to an unfortunate woman. to you I owe the blessing of parting calmly, serenely, and aln joyously."

"My daughter," said François Paty, "there still remains you to pardon those who have done you injury."

"Pardon them! pardon them!" cried the unfortunate lac with a fresh explosion of despair. "You know not what I ha endured! you know not, that during the six years which hav passed since I crossed the sill of this accursed house, the lip which speak to you have never smiled once; that these eye which look upon you have been scalded in their sockets with tears; that there has not been an hour in which this heart, about to be chilled for ever, has not been deluged with outrages. You do not know, then,—you do not see that I am dying!"

"Is this, my daughter," replied the pastor, "the calm and serene soul you are about to replace in the hands of the Eternal? Christ upon the cross prayed for His enemies. Pardon, my child, is divine! It is the wave which bathes our wounds; it is the essence that purifies them; it is by pardon alone that the offering of our ills can become a present agreeable to God. Besides, my child, what being sufficiently vain or sufficiently perfect would dare to flatter himself that he did not himself stand in need of indulgence? Let us pardon here below, that we may be pardoned above."

The comtesse remained silent, and the struggle which passed in her breast might be traced upon her darkened countenance. At length, after a few minutes of inward combat and self-collection, her features lost their rigidity, her countenance cleared, and her brow looked as if illumined by the halo of the blessed.

"Pardon me, O Lord! and pardon him as I pardon him!" cried she with emotion, raising her arms towards heaven.

After he had administered the last sacrament, in the presence of a few servants, who knelt around the bed, the pastor remained alone with the dying lady, who declined visibly. He had resumed his place by her pillow, and continued to pour pious and consoling words upon the departing soul. When he paused, to pray in silence, the poor lady said in a feeble but sweet voice,—

"Speak, speak, father! your words comfort me!"

Then François Paty, resuming his discourse, showed her the heavens which were opening to receive her. The comtesse was calm, and sometimes a vague smile would pass over her discoloured lips, as if she could already perceive the dawn of a new life.

Towards morning, when the light of the lamp was fading away before the light of day, Madame des Songères, who for some time had not spoken a word, sprang up all at once in her bed, and with extended arms, a beaming face, and a piercing voice,—

“My father!” exclaimed she; “angels are coming to fetch me!”

At these words, like a broken lily which falls, she sank gently down upon her couch, and, having bent over her to receive her last sigh, François Paty saw that she was dead.

Almost at the same instant hasty steps were heard from the corridor, the door of the chamber was thrown open, and the comte, in hunting-dress, booted and spurred, his hat on his head, and his whip in his hand, entered.

“On your knees, monsieur, on your knees!” cried the pastor, in a voice of thunder. “On your knees before God! on your knees before this lifeless body, which contained the soul of a saint and a martyr! on your knees before the mortal remains of the heavenly creature who pardoned you before she expired!”

The comte had stopped in the middle of the chamber, pale and trembling with anger; but subdued by that voice, and crushed as it were by the gesture which accompanied it, he mechanically removed his hat, bent one knee, and bowed his head, whilst François Paty slowly retired—sad, grave, and collected.

It may be remembered that M. des Songères departed the day after the funeral. He had nothing to detain him in a place he had no reason to like; where he felt he was hated, and which he would perhaps have never again revisited, if, twenty years after, he had not thought of an expedient which would free him, at the same time, from his son, who was a restraint upon him, and a family lawsuit, which had for a long time placed in jeopardy the proprietorship of the château and domain of Bigny.

I ought here to speak at length of this affair, show the origin of it, unravel the twisted threads of it, and, in doing this, deck my recital with a few flowers of court procedures. But, unfortunately, having always lived in a pious ignorance and a holy horror of things connected with chicanery, there is not a country cub, entered only yesterday into the office of an advocate or the den of an officer, who would not be more skilful than I in disentangling this history. Let it suffice to be known that this lawsuit was instituted by the Comte des Songères' own sister, who had committed a *mésalliance* in marrying one M. Barnajon, a man of money, who had died a few years before in the field of honour—that is to say, the Bourse,—of an attack of apoplexy.

brought on by an unforeseen fall in the funds. It would appear that the comte, a great spendthrift in his youth, had had recourse more than once to the strong-box of Barnajon; so that the widow, who besides backed her claim by other titles, thought, one fine day, that she had a right to turn out her beloved brother. A rupture naturally followed, and hostilities commenced. War once declared, Madame Barnajon carried it on the more vehemently, from the comte, while taking the crowns of her husband, having so bitterly ridiculed his mean origin that she herself had felt hurt, and nothing would have so soothed her pride as to enter as sovereign the manor of her ancestors. Besides which, she was urged on by Mademoiselle Malvina, her daughter, a grand personage, of eighteen, who was dying with the desire of having a seignorial château, and to add a title to her name, till she could change it for that of a noble husband. A title and armorial bearings were the spring dreams of Mademoiselle Malvina Barnajon.

This little war, of which the brother and sister defrayed all the expenses, had lasted several years, to the great satisfaction of the exchequer and the lawyers. Now, this was not the only pre-occupation of the kind that troubled the Comte des Songères in his German retreat. His son had a long time passed the period of his majority. Roger at any time could demand an account of his mother's fortune; and that young man must have been as ignorant or careless as he was of the interests of real life, not to have himself thought of it. So it was that the comte could not get rid of the presence of Roger, and free himself from all paternal responsibility, but at this price. Things were in this position, when it came into his head that a marriage between his son and his niece would level all his difficulties, and relieve him from all his embarrassments. To marry Roger to Malvina, to constitute the domain in litigation as the dowry, and thus get rid of two debts at once,—the idea was certainly a good one; it only remained to carry it into execution. It was for these objects M. des Songères set out one fine morning for France, and repaired to Paris, after having sojourned two or three days at the Château de Bigny. The enterprise was perilous; but the comte did not despair of carrying it through, from the knowledge he had of the weakness of mind of his sister. As to Roger's will in the matter, he cared little about that, accustomed as he was to bend it like a reed, or mould it like a piece of wax.

To return to the good curé of Saint-Sylvain. We can easily comprehend the joy he felt on hearing of the return of Roger—his emotion on seeing that handsome young man, whom he had

one night held as a child in his arms. He had often thought of him since that night of melancholy memory; he had often asked himself whither the winds had driven that frail branch, separated from its stem; he had often called down the blessings of Heaven upon that young head, which he remembered to have pressed against his heart, moist and burning with the tears and kisses of his mother. We can easily comprehend how earnest he was to attract him to the cure, and with what solicitude he must have studied that mind and that intelligence, the care of which had been solemnly confided to him, and with what delight he must have recognized in the young man the virtues of the adorable creature whose last adieux and last sighs he had formerly received. As to the possibility of love arising between his niece and the son of the Comte des Songères, the poor holy man never dreamt of such a thing. The little virgin only appeared to him as a child; and, besides, there was as much candour and innocence beneath the white hairs of the pastor as beneath the brown and fair locks of Catherine and Roger.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAPPY DAYS.

Now, if I am asked by what enchantment it happened that these two young people loved each other, I would ask, in my turn, by what enchantment it could have happened otherwise. In the situation in which Roger was placed—dreamy, *ennuyé*, solitary, tormented by his youth, which the silence of the fields and the splendour of the spring season agitated, turbulent and restless, not knowing how to employ the activity of his being and the liberty allowed him by the absence of his father—the young man would necessarily love the first woman moderately endowed whom chance should throw in his way. Since his return, he had seen none but cow and sheep-keepers—rustic beauties whom the imagination of the hero of La Mancha could not have transformed into Dulcinias—when he met with Catherine. This was more than sufficient to occupy a mind which only sought distraction.

and to inflame a heart which only waited for a spark. As to the love of our little friend, it explains itself so naturally, that we may dispense with discussing it, particularly if we remember that to that time Claude had been the most seducing object she was acquainted with. They loved each other at once, and without thinking or comprehending anything of the matter. Like two rivulets equally clear and limpid, which mingle their waters, and only present one sheet of crystal in which the heavens behold themselves, these two children by little and little mingled their ideas and their feelings, and soon their souls melted into one, so pure and transparent, that Love might be seen forming himself at the bottom of it, like a pearl. It might have been thought that God had formed them for each other, so much so, that, within a month, they fancied they must have grown up together, played together around the same cradle, and had never been parted. Without doubt there was a wide difference between the simple grace of the little virgin and the exquisite elegance of the young vicomte; but Catherine joined to a lively instinct for poetical things a natural distinction, which came from her heart; and it was exactly the rustic, and even rather wild perfume, which she exhaled which delighted Roger; whilst, on the contrary, the amiable and simple girl had allowed herself to be carried away by the more finished charms of the brilliant cavalier. It is thus they had between them, in an almost perfect degree, the contrasts and relations which knit sympathies and cement mutual tendernesses; they completed themselves the one by the other.

Do you know anything more graceful and charming than the first buds of passion between two young hearts which quiver at the same moment, at the first breath of love, like two flowers scarcely opened, which burst with the first gentle breeze, and bloom with the same morning ray? First emotions of virginal hearts! mysterious trouble of the senses, which knows not its own meaning! fresh enchantments of first meetings! first broken words of happiness! There is not, in the stifling atmosphere of cities, a retreat so dark and sad that may not be enlivened and illumined by the light of these delicious joys; but they alone have known the intoxication of them who have tasted them beneath a vast and pure sky, who have mixed them up with all nature, and impregnated them with the scents of the woods. Happy, then, are the lovers who have sheltered in the seclusion of valleys the poem of their tendernesses! In vain will they grow old; there are perfumes which will recall around their wrinkled brow a swarm of dispersed dreams; and the concerts of creation will

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still come to them, in the decline of fading life, like a distant echo of the hymns of their youth.

These were, in truth, happy days. The season was fine. Roger set out on horseback, and cleared in a few hours the distance between Bigny and Saint-Sylvain; whilst Catherine, awake likewise from earliest dawn, passed by turns from her window to the door of the presbytery, and sometimes even went furtively to the corner of the road, from which she could see Roger glide, like a rising star, round the turning of the hedge. He was always escorted by his dogs, who, accustomed to the caresses of Catherine, never failed, as they approached the village, to run forward to meet the young girl, to gambol around her, and lick her hands and her feet. Every one of these days passed like a dream—I cannot well tell how. This, however, is the manner in which some of them glided away. These were neither the least enchanting nor the least delightful.

It was shortly after the Saint-Sylvain; Roger had only been two or three times to the cure. One Sunday, on leaving Mass, at the moment Claude, proud of a new vest and new trousers, which he had screwed from the avarice of his worthy father, was advancing towards Catherine to conduct her back to the presbytery, the young vicomte, who had likewise been present at Mass, offered, the first, his arm to the little virgin, who accepted it, blushing with pleasure. As they crossed the Place, they became mingled with a group of lads and lasses collected around a colporteur, who had spread out in the sun his bale of books, chaplets, and coloured prints. After having purchased a number of chaplets and pictures, which he graciously distributed among the circle, astonished at his liberality, Roger and Catherine began to turn over the scattered treasures of the itinerant bookseller. Among other *chefs-d'œuvre* were:—"Victor; ou, l'Enfant de la Forêt;" "Alexis; ou, la Maisonnnette dans les Bois;" "Cartouche et Mardarin;" "Rinaldo Rinaldini;" "Les Amours de Lord Byron;" "Les Aventures galantes de la Famille Bonaparte"—then pale flowers, grown in hotbeds; "Estelle et Nemorin;" "La Bergère des Alpes;" "Les Incas;" "Gonzalve de Cordoue." I am obliged to confess that my hero and heroine were both nearly strangers to all kinds of literature. The education of Roger had been singularly neglected; the reading of Catherine had been till that time confined to a few volumes on religious subjects. And yet, for fine and delicate natures, however little or not at all literary, books have a charm which seduces them at once, at whatever page they open them. Thus the niece of François Paty had opened and shut half a dozen of these suc-

cessively, after having only glanced at them, when she appeared all at once absorbed by one of the works she had taken up by chance.

"What are you reading, mademoiselle," asked Roger, "which chains and fixes your attention so?"

The volume which the little virgin held, printed upon pretty good paper, with head-pieces, and *ornamented* with engravings, which had at least the advantage over certain modern illustrations, of a simple and natural expression,—this volume, I say, which absorbed the young girl in such a manner, was called plainly "Paul et Virginie." Delightful poem, the charm of all ages! Catherine, on opening it, had fallen by chance upon the passage where the two beautiful children go to ask pardon for a poor slave, who has fled from his master's house; and from the first lines of this touching recital, under the sun of June, falling directly on her head, she felt herself, as it were, enchanted, and enveloped in a shade of freshness.

"Oh!" cried she, "I should like to have this book!"

"Well," replied Roger, "we will buy it, and read it together."

Then, having discovered among the rest of the pictures a passably ugly portrait, which was said to represent St. Claude, he offered it as a present to the younger Noirel, who stood close to Catherine, as motionless and stiff as a pike.

"I owe you that," said he, "for the obliging manner in which you one day pointed out to me the road to Saint-Sylvain."

This was the first time Roger had made any allusion to that little episode. Claude coloured, and stood with his mouth open and his eyes cast down upon the picture, which he had taken mechanically.

"Well, it is droll!" said Catherine; "it is certainly like him!"

At these words, she and Roger indulged in a little laugh, and then directed their course gaily towards the cure, the little fairy hanging on the arm of young Des Songères, with her book in the pocket of her apron; whilst the unfortunate Claude walked backwards, carrying his patron saint in his hand, with a most dejected air.

Then, as it had been agreed upon, the charming book was read in common,—that is to say, Roger read it aloud whilst Catherine embroidered and Martha spun. As to the good curé, the duties of his ministry left him very little time to be moved to pity by imaginary misfortunes. These readings were sometimes made in the sitting-room of the presbytery, and sometimes on the terrace, under the chestnut-trees. You may here behold the little picture:—Roger reading; Catherine plying her needle; Martha

twisting her spindle; the sporting-dogs couched, their noses between their paws, at the feet of the little fairy, who suspends her work from time to time to pat them with her hand; and lastly, Claude, who has succeeded in eluding the watchfulness of his father, and escaped from the school, entering with a silent step, and seating himself behind the chair of the pretty embroideress. I cannot say whether Roger read well or ill; all I know is, that he read simply, and that his voice went straight to the heart of our little friend. For Catherine and Roger this book was like an enchanted cup at which their lips met; like a spring of living water, into which their souls plunged at the same time, and melted one into the other. In their thoughts, they substituted themselves for the two heroes of the beautiful poem; and although they had only known each other for a few days, they took a delight, each in their turn, to establish mysterious relations between their destiny and that of the two children whose history they were reading. By the naïveté of the remarks and reflections which she occasionally put forth, Martha assisted in increasing these illusions.

"Oh, darling!" said she, from time to time, interrupting the reader, "I really think I can see you with M. Roger, walking in our woods."

"Why not with me?" Claude once ventured to say: having grown up with Catherine, as Paul did with Virginia, he was indignant at seeing his place usurped by another.

"Dame!" replied the old nurse; "because M. Paul had not the honour, as you have, to sing at the lutrin, and teach the little boys of the village to read."

"That is no reason," replied Claude, as red as a turkey-cock.

"Listen, my lad," added Martha; "I did not pretend to deprive you of any of your deserts; nevertheless, it is my opinion that M. Paul could not have had such a turned-up nose as yours."

"That is no reason!" repeated Claude, clenching his hands.

"Cease, cease!" said Catherine, more red, in her turn, than a pomegranate blossom; "you forget that we are not in the Isle of France, and that the Creuse runs within a few paces of us. Leave off this childish talk, and let us go on with our beautiful story."

This little romance is a poetic image of life; like the morning of existence, the first pages are filled with freshness and harmony, the latter are veiled in funereal crape. As they approached the end, the voice of Roger faltered, the bosom of Catherine throbbed, Martha prayed God to appease the waves of the angry sea, and Claude kept his burning eye fondly fixed upon the little maiden,

as if ready to rush to snatch her from the fury of the waves. When they saw—spectacle worthy of eternal pity—a young lady appear on the poop of the Saint-Geran, Martha and Catherine let fall their work—the one her spindle and the other her needle; and when at length, with arms crossed upon her breast and with eyes raised towards heaven, like an angel ready to take flight, Virginia was carried off by a huge wave, both the women burst into sobs, and Roger himself could not restrain his tears;—as for Claude, at that exciting moment, he threw his arms round the little maiden, and pressing her closely to him,—

“Oh, my Catherine! I—I would have saved you!” cried he, with an expression of ineffable tenderness.

To these readings, which had absorbed two or three days, succeeded long conversations, in which François Paty mingled his indulgent and kind voice. The old curé was never tired of seeing at the presbytery that young Roger whom he had at first loved in remembrance of his noble mother. He was pleased at having him and his niece under his eye at the same time. At close of day, they all three went to walk in the valley on the banks of the Creuse, either through the ripening corn, or along the slopes of the neighbouring hills. François Paty walked between the two young people; and it was a charming sight to behold that white and smiling head, with those two, now visionary and thoughtful brows. He spoke to them of God, of nature, of the duties of creatures here below. At times he would make them sit beside him upon a green bank, and read to them some passage from the Bible. By this time the horizon became empurpled with the fires of the setting sun, the evening breeze arose, and they heard from a distance the melancholy chant of the herdsmen mingled with the lowing of the oxen returning slowly to their stables. He also spoke to them of their mothers, whom they had both lost. He described their graces, their goodness, their piety, and what a sweet odour they had exhaled in passing over the earth. Then he required Roger to speak, in his turn. Roger related in what a way he had been brought up,—spoke of his silent infancy and his solitary youth. He also told them of all he had seen and observed during his voyages, the old cathedrals of Germany, and the old châteaux of the Rhine. Catherine took delight in these discourses, and François Paty derived a secret joy from the revelations of that amiable heart. They often stopped, to console some grief or succour some unfortunate. Sometimes it was a mendicant seated on the edge of a ditch; at others, it was a little girl, who went, like Paquerette, barefooted and her hair flying in the wind. In complicity with the charity

of the uncle and the niece, Roger drew a blessing upon a name which had so long been hateful in the country; the son discharged the debts of the father, and already the hatred, which like a rust had been eating the name for more than twenty years, began to disappear beneath a shower of benevolences. At length, when the stars illumined the sky and the frogs began their hoarse song among the rushes of the ponds, they resumed the road to the presbytery. Then followed there, around the frugal table, spread with cream, strawberries, and cherries, another good hour of chat and cheerful intimacy. Then Roger mounted on horse-back to return to Bigny, every time happier and better.

Thus were gliding away the days; and whilst Claude was wasting with sadness and neglect, the two handsome young people were giving themselves up to the charm which attracted them to each other: when it happened that one evening a few words which fell from François Paty filled the little maiden with trouble, and began to enlighten her on the state of her own heart,—for till that time the innocent child had not even suspected what was passing within her. One evening, as I said, while they were all three walking along the course of the river, I do not know how, but Roger chanced to speak of the protracted absence of the Comte des Songères, and of his return, which he supposed would be soon. In the first place, we should observe that with François Paty, Catherine, and Roger, there was never any mention made of the comte. The old pastor acted from a discretion which it is easy to comprehend; on his side, Roger, who only thought of his father with a vague feeling of terror, and who, besides, felt that he was little beloved in the country, took care to keep that shadow out of the picture of his happiness; as to Catherine, in the chaste intoxication of her senses, she scarcely troubled herself to think there was another person in the world besides her uncle and Roger. For what destinies was this young man reserved? What cause had brought him, after twenty years of absence, to the Château de Bigny? Was he to remain there, or would he shortly take again the road to Germany? Was he free, in short, and master of his own days? These were questions the little maiden never thought of putting to herself. For her, life had but one hour,—the hour when that young man was with her. Roger forgot himself in the same intoxication; and the good curé, who had, out of his ministry, all the carelessness and want of forethought of a child, was not at all the person to put these two young people in the road of reality. When speaking of his father, the young Des Songères, without meaning to do so, forcibly introduced the pastor to the truth of the situation.

"My young friend," said François Paty, with a feeling of sadness, "I believe it is my duty to warn you that the return of M. le Comte will necessarily put an end to our relations. We shall no longer be able to see each other, or at least, much less frequently."

At these words, the two young people stopped simultaneously, and looked at the pastor with an air of terror.

"Why so, dear uncle?" asked the little maiden.

"Why should you wish, monsieur le curé," asked Roger, "that the return of my father should, in any way, change our intimacy?"

"Do not ask me, my children," replied François Paty, taking a hand of each. "Learn only, my young friend," added he, addressing himself to Roger, "that when M. le Comte returns, you cannot, without disobeying, perhaps without irritating him, continue your visits at the cure, and that I myself should have scrupled to attract you here, if I had not had the last wishes of your mother to comply with, with regard to you."

"But, monsieur le curé," said the young man, with a slight expression of impatience, "of what consequence can it be to my father if I come once a week to sit at your table and repose beneath your roof? I am, besides, free, and master of my own actions," added he, in a tone of resolution.

"My friend," replied the pastor, "it will be painful to me not to see you again; but I will not be, nor ought not to be, a subject of discord between you and monsieur your father. I shall retain the consolation of having accomplished the duties with which your mother charged me on her death-bed. I have spoken to you of her, I shall soon go and speak to her of you."

"Monsieur le curé," added Roger, in a firm voice, "it was under your roof that, for the first time, I heard speak of the dear creature who gave me life; it was you who first taught me to know and adore her. You have received me with kindness; it is to you I owe the happiness of loving, and feeling myself a little beloved. I wish you, then, to understand, that nothing in the world has power to prevent me from crossing the sill of your door, unless you yourself forbid me."

"But, uncle, it seems ——" stammered Catherine, in a faint voice.

"Come, come, my children!" cried François Paty, with a melancholy smile, "why should we thus trouble this beautiful night? We are ungrateful towards God, who gives it to us. Where is the good, besides, of concerning ourselves about the future? Man passes like the water of that river, without know-

ing to-day where he shall be to-morrow. The great business is to merit of the Eternal that He should reunite in heaven the souls who have loved on earth."

In spite of all the pastor could say, the walk terminated sadly, and more than once the little fairy turned round to wipe stealthily her beautiful black eyes. When returned to the presbytery, and Roger had departed, less light and joyous than usual, she overwhelmed her uncle with questions, and he, no longer restrained by the presence of the young man, related vaguely what had passed, in the course of a winter's night, twenty years before. For fear of withering that soul in blossom, he softened and veiled the dark reality as much he could; but he said quite enough to allow his niece to form an idea of the character of Comte de Songeres, and of the hatred with which his proud and cruel heart must still be animated against the curé of Saint-Sylvain.

"But, uncle," cried Catherine, "all this need not prevent M. Roger from coming now and then to the cure. M. Roger said truly he is free, and master of his own actions."

"My child," replied François Paty, shaking his head, "this young man is less free than he supposes; he has a weak and tender heart, which will be broken, I greatly fear, by the stern will of his father, as was that of his mother. Come, to bed, to bed, my child! and God send you pleasant dreams!" added he, kissing her polished brow.

When retired to her chamber, Catherine shut the window violently in the face of Claude, who, standing against one of the limes with which the place of the church was planted, was breathing sighs enough to raise Atlas; then, throwing herself upon her bed, the poor child burst into tears,—first tears of love, more pure than the drops of dew which in the morning empearl the balmy petals of the lily, and which angels ought to gather in cups of opal and sapphire!

"Heavenly goodness! what is the matter, my child?" cried old Martha, taking her in her arms.

"Oh, nurse! nurse!" cried the little maiden, "we are going to be separated, as Paul and Virginia were."

Martha had great difficulty in comprehending how it could be; but when she did comprehend the cause of this great disaster—

"Why," said she, "this father must be a Turk! But, my darling, console yourself; the sea does not flow between Saint-Sylvain and Bigny. But, when all comes to all, if it pleases God M. Roger should not return, though it would be a great loss to the church, and the Sunday collection would suffer a little, the

good God will not abandon us, and we shall find means, as we have done before, to assist our poor."

Thereupon the old nurse, who understood about as much of love as she did of archæology, embraced Catherine, and went to bed.

"Ay!" muttered she, as she descended the stairs heavily, "then I suppose, too, I must give up all hopes of ever seeing such fine carp and beautiful geese in my kitchen again!"

In the mean time, Roger returned to Bigny at a gallop, decided upon breaking the paternal yoke, if it proved necessary, and attaching himself more closely to his love, to which he now began to perceive there were obstacles. This love—only for a few hours Roger had himself suspected it,—as a spark follows a blow, it had burst forth with the first difficulty it had encountered on its passage. As a general rule, love is so much the more probable as it seems to be impossible. Suppose two young people, whom their families, closely connected, have affianced to each other in the cradle. They were born next door to each other, have grown up almost under the same roof. It is the dream of the mothers that they should insensibly conceive a most tender affection for each other, and end by marrying: you may then wager a hundred to one that they will love elsewhere, and will never be united at all. But, on the other hand, if, instead of being friends, their parents should be, as is said, at daggers drawn, and the two children are forbidden to meet or speak to each other, that there may be between them, like an arm of the ocean, or a peak of the Cordilleras, one of those old hereditary hatreds which are transmitted from generation to generation—it is almost certain that these children will come to love each other with idolatry. It is the Montagues and Capulets that make Romeos and Juliets.

All were asleep in the château when Roger entered. On crossing the salon to gain his chamber, he was not a little astonished to see, by the light of the lamp he carried in his hand, a magnificent ebony pianoforte, with brass fillets, freshly unpacked, and here and there, in confusion, an endless number of chests and packages. A piano in the house of the Comte de Songères was as surprising a thing as a volume of poetry would be in the den of a fox, or a flute in the aerie of a vulture. Roger possessed the advantage—now-a-days so rare—of playing upon no instrument; but if he had been afflicted with a pretty taste for the piano, he knew his father too well to reasonably suppose him capable of any intention of a kind surprise or a delicate attention. In order to know what this meant, he went at once and knocked at

the door of Robineau, who awoke growling, and replied that the things had arrived that day by carriers, addressed to M. le Comte. Upon being pressed by the young man, Robineau declared that he knew nothing more about the matter.

The next morning, early, Roger was awakened suddenly by a frightful disturbance in the château, generally as calm and silent as the tomb. He arose hastily, and found, on leaving his chamber, Master Robineau, in the midst of an army of upholsterers, painters, carpenters, and workmen of all sorts, occupied in pulling to pieces, for the purpose of revivifying it, the dark and dismal interior of the old manor-house. Some were unhooking the old, faded, and mouldy curtains; others were refreshing the hangings; here the floors were being put to rights, there the ceilings were being repainted. Robineau presided over these labours with an air of importance, and when he perceived Roger, his jackall's countenance assumed an expression of malicious joy and insolent triumph.

"What does all this mean?" asked Roger.

"I am executing the orders of M. le Comte," replied Robineau drily.

"But still ——" added the young man.

"I am executing the orders of M. le Comte," repeated the old scoundrel.

"Yes, but you must know ——"

"I know nothing," replied Robineau, "except that I execute the orders of M. le Comte."

"You are deceiving me, monsieur," cried Roger warmly; "show me the letter my father has written to you on the subject."

"Seeing that I recognise here but one master," replied Robineau, "I am quite distressed, monsieur le vicomte, to be obliged to disobey you; unfortunately, among the instructions M. le Comte has given me, I think there is no order to communicate to you the letter he writes to me."

"That is quite sufficient, monsieur," replied Roger haughtily; and he turned away, tolerably perplexed with what was going on in the château, whilst Robineau rubbed his hands, laughed in his filthy beard, and wrinkled his old steward's brow with joy.

Agitated, tormented, observing with silent inquietude what was going on around him, young Des Songères allowed several days to pass without going to the presbytery. During all this time, our little friend was suffering greatly. From the moment she saw clearly into her own heart, she had become all at once

grave and reserved : true love is serious. And yet, amidst the preoccupations that depressed her, the pious girl did not forget either the necessities of the poor of the commune, or the ever-returning wants of the presbytery. She had just finished several pieces of embroidery that had been ordered, and as little Jean was confined to his bed by a growing fever, she determined upon carrying them herself to Aubusson, which was the nearest city. Besides, in the state of heart and mind in which Catherine found herself, she needed solitude, action, open air and liberty. She set out one morning, then, without having warned her friend Claude, who would not have failed to wish to accompany her ; she set out, as formerly, upon Annette, who neighed joyously, and frisked her tail saucily on recognizing the weight of her young mistress.

Although fragile, nervous, and delicate, Catherine was of an energetic and vivacious organization, and little disposed to the painful side of the passion. On finding herself once more upon her old grey pony, on a beautiful July morning, amidst the splendours of that nature she loved so much and understood so well, on inhaling the air with expanded lungs, on hearing the birds sing along her passage, on seeing again the fields, the meadows, and hills, which she had traversed so often happy and light ; on receiving, as formerly, on her way, the friendly salutations of the herdsmen and shepherds, the little maiden forgot all, and felt nothing but the chaste excitement of the youth and love which flowed upon her from all sides. Her eyes resumed their brightness, her cheeks their freshness, and her lips their smile. Indeed, she was charming ! and, whoever you may be—Quaker, hermit, or saint,—I swear you would have stopped to look at her, thus gliding along the hedges, her pony trotting, with her straw hat and blue ribbons, her white corsage and her frock of brown cotton, at the bottom of which two little feet furtively showed their noses.

She was as much beloved in the city as in the country ; it was quite a holiday in the houses she stopped at. She was received in the best families, which welcomed her with kindness, and treated her as an equal. It is but right to say that Aubusson was not then what it is now, and that the benefits of civilization had not penetrated to the recesses of these poor mountains. Manners were then simple ; the city only formed, to speak properly, a single family. Dear little city ! river with beautiful waves ! hills of La Magdeleine ! shades of La Seiglière ! garden of triple stages, in which, when quite a child, I played with my sister ! window where I have so often seen my dear mother seated at

work! My heart is moved by these remembrances, awakened, in spite of myself, by the name alone of the country, lost to me for ever!

This time Catherine had to carry her embroidery to Demoiselles G——, two young persons to whom she was particularly attached, on account of their courtesy and kindness. Upon hearing the steps of Annette stop at their door, which they had recognized from the other end of the street, the two sisters flew to meet the little maiden, and received her with open arms.

"Oh, how beautiful you look!" said Octavie, examining her from head to foot.

"And so fresh, and so nice and smart!" said Adrienne, in her turn; "you come like a bouquet of flowers, gathered in the dew of the morning."

Then they led her triumphantly to their mother, who pressed her to her heart like a third daughter. Then followed chat without end,—it might be imagined the chirping of three birds in a bush. They admired the embroidery of the little fairy; went into ecstasies upon the delicacy of the stitch and the finish of the work: they loaded her with compliments, caresses, and presents. Adrienne gave her her silver thimble; Octavie unfastened from her neck a little cross of small pearls, and hung it round Catherine's neck, without saying anything of the pay for the embroidery which they forced her to accept.

"Dear and amiable demoiselles, what can I give you in my turn?" asked the niece of François Paty in a sad tone.

"Pray to the good God for our mother," replied both, embracing her.

Then the time for parting came, and that was the sooner from their observing that the heavens were becoming overcast, and that Catherine had no time to lose if she wished to arrive at Saint-Sylvain before the storm came on. In spite of this precaution, the clouds burst as she approached the village of La Hachère, and the young traveller was obliged to seek refuge in the farm where Paquerette performed the functions of pig-keeper. The poor girl, who was there alone, did the honours of the place to the best of her ability,—that is to say, after having put Annette under shelter, she lit, chattering and talking all the while, a good clear fire, before which Catherine could dry her dress, and warm her pretty hands.

She had been there nearly an hour, looking at the hail, and listening to the gabble of Paquerette, when she heard at a distance the sound of the gallop of a horse, which drew nearer and nearer ;

and suddenly the girl, who was standing in the doorway, cried out, clapping her hands,—

"Mademoiselle! mademoiselle! here is the handsome gentleman!"

Almost at the same instant, a horse stopped foaming before the farm, and Roger leaped off his back. He, likewise, surprised by the storm, came to seek shelter, without the least idea of meeting Catherine, any more than she had of meeting him. They both blushed, and were agitated at recognizing each other; for since they had become enlightened upon the state of their own hearts, they had lost their confidence and serenity when together. Fortunately, the inexhaustible gabble of Paquerette extricated them from their embarrassment, and permitted them to listen to the mysterious language of their hearts, which drew towards each other and spoke in a low tone.

"Tell me your history," said Roger suddenly to the poor girl."

"My history?" demanded the poor girl; "can a poor creature like me——"

"Tell it, nevertheless," added the young man.

"Since you wish it!—well, it won't be long," said she, placing her elbows familiarly on the corner of the rough table, her chin on her hand, and her face turned towards Roger. "I was found one April morning in a ditch quite filled with pâquerettes, (Easter daisies), which explains to you, monsieur, the name that has been given to me in the country here. Some poor farmers of La Hachère picked me up, and took care of me, and as soon as I was able to put one foot before the other, they gave me their pigs to mind. One day, whilst driving my animals about, I met Mademoiselle Catherine, who was passing this way on her little grey mare. She stopped to speak to me, took a liking for me, and told me to come and see her at the cure of Saint-Sylvain. I must tell you that till that time I was no more than the grass of the fields, or the moss of the woods. I had no idea of anything; and was not unlike falling leaves, which do not know whither the wind will carry them,—only I was sad, and often wept because I was alone in the world. Mademoiselle Catherine changed all that. She taught me to love the good God, to see Him everywhere, and to bless Him in the beautiful things He has made. She has taught me also, that, mean as I am, I am a creature of this all-powerful God; that my soul comes from heaven, and will go back there again. I do not know whether it is to the truths she has told me, or to the happiness that I have in knowing her, that I ought to attribute the change that has taken place in me;

but what I do know is, that since I met the little maiden upon her grey mare I have been neither solitary nor sad ; and instead of weeping as I formerly did, I go about gaily, singing along the roads. And there, my handsome monsieur, that is my history."

Whilst she was speaking thus, seated, each upon a joint-stool, in that poor farm-room, open to all the winds of heaven, between naked and stained walls, beneath smoky rafters, where the spider wove his web in peace, and from which hung a few ropes of golden onions, they both did look so beautiful !—Catherine, smiling and thoughtful, in one corner of the hearth, Roger's fair head standing out in relief from the brown of the wall—they looked so handsome, with an effect so graceful and poetic, that Paquerette even was struck with it ; and when she had finished her history, she remained motionless and mute, admiring them.

"Would not one say," cried she at last, "that they were two angels, surprised by the rain while they were walking on the earth, and had come into this poor hut to dry the feathers of their wings?"

At these words, Catherine rose, and advancing towards the door, she began, with an absent air, to look at the sun shining in the horizon, and the clouds dispersing about the heavens ; whilst Roger, still standing by the fire, continued to chat with Paquerette.

"So then, my child," said he, "Mademoiselle Catherine is what you love best in the world?"

"Yes! oh yes!" cried Paquerette, joining her two hands ; "how could I do otherwise? I love her, in the first place, because she is good, and that I know nothing better under the heaven. Then, explain this, if you please,—I love her because she is beautiful, and that I know nothing so beautiful on the earth, not even you, monsieur, who are, nevertheless, very good-looking. Nothing rejoices my heart so as to see her. Did you behold her on Saint-Sylvain's day, in her white dress, with her sash as blue as your eyes? Was she not charming in that old church, kneeling in the midst of the poor of the village and the commune? Would not any one have said that she was the real holy Virgin, surrounded by the afflicted, whose mother she is? You looked very smart, too,—you, on your bench ; it was I that saw you first, and pointed you out to Mademoiselle Catherine. That must have given her pleasure, for she blushed like a strawberry at seeing you, and her large black eyes sparkled like two stars. Shall I tell you," said she, lowering her voice to a mysterious tone—"shall I tell you what I think at this moment?"

"Tell us," said the young man, pleased with listening to her.

"I think," replied she, smiling, "that if, instead of being what I am, a poor little pig-keeper, I was what you are, a young handsome gentleman, having a château, park and domains,—"

"Well!" asked Roger, "what would you do?"

"Guess!" said Paquerette.

"How can I guess?"

"Don't guess, then," said she.

"Come, come!" cried Catherine, "the sky is clear now. Adieu, Paquerette! and thank you for your shelter; we will go now."

In a few minutes she and Roger were mounted and riding along, side by side, under an arbour of aspens and oaks, which shook, like pearls, upon their heads the drops of rain with which they were loaded. They saw the sun sink behind the hills, and when the stars appeared in the firmament they were still at some distance from Saint-Sylvain's. The road Roger was pursuing was not precisely that which led to Bigny, but he paid no attention to that; Catherine herself took no notice of the circumstance, and besides, it was quite plain that the young man could not leave the unprotected girl alone in that sequestered road. The noises peculiar to day by degrees died upon the ear, the luminous band of the setting sun paled and faded away, the moon rose round and radiant, and soon nothing was to be heard but the drops of rain falling from leaf to leaf, and a few birds twittering their caresses in their nests.

They both rode on in silence. The air was saturated with the delicious scents exhaled by the earth, the meadows and the woods, after the rain. Sometimes the road became so narrow, that the breath of Catherine, more fresh and balmy than the mint of the hedges, passed over the face of Roger; whilst the hair of the young man, finer than the finest silk, touched the cheek of the little fairy. They had gone on thus for more than an hour, when the two horses, by common accord, stopped at a cross-road, to know which their riders would take. At that instant Catherine and Roger looked at each other, and, for the first time, these two young creatures declared their love.

It was but a word, exchanged in the silence of night,—nothing but one word, but so sweet, so delightful, that it is no longer worth living when the season is past for hearing and pronouncing it.

"Catherine, I love you," said Roger.

"I love you, Roger," Catherine replied. Then they imme-

diately separated, after having thus shared heaven between them, without perceiving the head of Claude, who was watching them behind a hedge.

That same evening, on entering his chamber, Roger found a letter on his table, with the Paris post-mark. He broke the seal, stamped with the family arms, and read the following lines :—

“MY SON,—Be prepared to receive, in a few days, my sister and her daughter, who have consented to favour us with their company at the Château de Bigny for some months. I should fear to offend you, if I were to remind you of the feelings with which you ought to be penetrated towards your aunt and your cousin; I leave you, with confidence, to the inspirations of your own heart.—Your father,

“COMTE DES SONGÈRES.”

It is very much to be doubted whether Roger to that moment had even suspected the existence of his aunt, Madame Barnajon, and his cousin, Mademoiselle Malvina. At reading this note, he felt a shudder pass over his heart; but without dwelling long upon the unwelcome return of his father, or the arrival of these ladies, he gave himself up entirely to the sentiment of his happiness.

CHAPTER IX.

PROJECTS.

Now, on the evening of the same day, whilst our young lovers were following side by side the road from La Hachère to Saint-Sylvain, Father Noirel and François Paty were walking together under the tall chestnut-trees of the terrace of the cure. The churchwarden was thoughtful; the pastor was contemplating, in a kind of religious ecstasy, the sun setting behind a mass of clouds, like the falling walls of a city in flames.

“See how beautiful God is!” cried he all at once, with a

burst of pious exaltation, pointing to the magnificent spectacle which at that instant was presented by the valleys, the woods, the hills, flooded with light, shaded with bands of purple, and plated with sheets of gold.

The churchwarden shook his head with the air of a man upon whom the splendours of the setting sun produce but little effect.

"What ails you, neighbour Noirel? you are dull," said François Paty, who had at length remarked the unhappy-looking countenance of his silent companion.

M. Noirel was, in fact, very dull. Claude was giving his father, as is commonly said, a twist to untwist, and this twist was not precisely of the finest silk. The churchwarden was sensible that nothing but a marriage between his son and the niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain could restore peace to his home, or reason to the brain of Claude. Besides, this marriage had always been the object of his secret ambition. His vanity took delight in it; his avarice even found its account in it. He knew right well that Catherine was poor, and would not have the value of a sou at the death of her uncle; but he likewise knew it was not for nothing she was called the little fairy throughout the country. Without speaking of her qualities of order and economy, which were truly marvellous, he beheld a fortune at the ends of her ten pretty fingers; and from hearing François Paty frequently repeat that the little magician had doubled the revenues of the cure, the old miser had finished by forming an anxious desire to judge of this himself, and to set the little fairy to work beneath his own roof. Unfortunately, François Paty seemed in no hurry to resign the treasure Father Noirel was so covetous of. Not that he was repugnant to this union; far from it, he wished it: but the fact is, that, unknown to himself, and without rendering an account to himself why, he retarded the conclusion of this epoch as much as possible. Besides being accustomed to view Catherine as a child, he was perfectly conscious that she was the life and soul of the presbytery; he vaguely comprehended that when once married, she would bear away with her the poetry from his hearth, and the charm from his house. So, to all the overtures of the churchwarden, he contented himself with replying—"We will see;" "Yes, no doubt;" "We will speak of it another time." And such was the cause of the sombre and preoccupied look of the worthy M. Noirel, when walking with his friend beneath the tall chestnut-trees of the terrace.

"Neighbour, you are dull," repeated François Paty, in a kindly voice.

"Monsieur le curé, I have reason to be so," replied the churchwarden, in a very lugubrious tone.

"What's the matter, then, Noirel? Speak—you frighten me. Have you any grief that I can neither share nor comfort?"

"Well, monsieur le curé," cried the dolorous Noirel, "if you insist upon my telling you, my Claude gives me serious uneasiness. Have you observed him lately? The unhappy lad is as yellow as a quince; he gets thinner and thinner every day; he is already nothing but the shadow of himself.

"Noirel," replied François Paty, "you know Claude is not naturally very fat. I really believe, my good friend, you are alarming yourself without cause."

"Alas! monsieur le curé," resumed the churchwarden, sighing, "from being thin as he was, his poor body is become quite diaphanous; you may see the stars through it. Would to God, however, I had no other cause of alarm! That my son has ceased to eat and drink, I do not complain, having always considered abstinence and sobriety as the virtues most agreeable to the Lord. Unfortunately, that is not all. Claude no longer attends to the school. This morning he disappeared without my knowing what is become of him. Added to which, at the lutrin he gets worse every Sunday; his voice is no more than a dying echo of what it was formerly. Ah! monsieur le curé, if there is here below a permitted and legitimate sorrow, it is that of an unfortunate father who, having sacrificed everything for the education of his son, in the hope that he will be the pride of his old age and an ornament to society, sees, as I do, that hope broken, and gathers nothing but bitter fruits from the ungrateful branches of the tree which he has for twenty years watered with the sweat of his brow."

At these words, the cunning old fellow, whose despair was notwithstanding sincere, drew from his pocket a large handkerchief, with the help of which he feigned to sponge his eyes, which never wept but with joy when he gloated over his crowns.

"Come, come, Noirel," cried the really affected pastor, "do not grieve in that way. Do you think, then," added he with an absent air,—"do you think it is love that troubles our good Claude to this degree?"

"Do I think so, monsieur le curé? What can it be but that beggar Love? I can hear him all night sobbing and gnawing his bolster with all his might. If he catches but a glimpse, through an open door, of your niece's dress, neither God nor the saints can keep him to his stool. At night he plants himself, like another lime, in the place of the church, and never moves as long

as he can see a light in Catherine's window. I will be sworn that he only went out this morning for the purpose of skulking behind the hedges and bushes, and following Annette. Yes, yes, it is love, clear enough. I was so myself for three months; Madame Noirel could tell you something about that, if the good God had not done me the kindness——"

Here, perceiving he was going to utter something very silly, the churchwarden stopped in time, and again carried his handkerchief to his eyes.

"Well, Noirel," replied the good curé, in a melancholy tone, "since it is love, we must marry our two children; you know very well that it has always been my wish. My niece must love your son——"

"Paternal vanity apart, monsieur le curé, I would ask you how she could avoid loving him? Do you see many young men in the parish more genteelly made? Intelligence, youth, an honourable name, a brilliant education, a fine social position, singer at the lutrin, schoolmaster, churchwarden in prospective, —with a little more stoutness, Claude would be an accomplished cavalier, and happiness will perform that miracle."

"Yes," said François Paty, "he has an upright heart and a worthy mind. I feel that I can confide to him my only treasure in this world. But, Noirel, do you not think as I do, that Catherine is still very young?"

"Very young, monsieur le curé! Do you know that it is twenty years last winter since you came to instal yourself in the cure of this village?"

"Twenty years!" cried François Paty with surprise; "those twenty years have passed like a dream. I declare, Noirel, I did not think myself so old. You are right, my friend, there is no receding; we must marry these two children. I have not too much time to remain upon earth; I ought not to depart before I have secured the destiny of my beloved niece. Neighbour, I have faith in your son; I don't know that he has all the agreeable qualities you say he has, but I have known in him, at all times, solid qualities upon which the daughter of my sister may rely for passing through life. I repeat it, this marriage has always been agreeable to me; it will answer my most sanguine wishes. Whence arises it, notwithstanding, that I at this moment feel my heart less inclined to joy than to sadness? How can it be otherwise? This little girl has been at all times an enchantment in my existence, the cheerer of my table and my hearth, the smile of my old age, a blessing beneath my humble roof;—when I think that I shall no more see her hovering about me from

morning till night, I can but weep, Noirel ! Thus," added he, casting round him a lingering look, "a few weeks, and this house will be like a bush without a nest, a cage without a bird."

"My dear Monsieur Paty !" cried the churchwarden, who triumphed in secret, "you forget that we live next door to each other. From your window you can see the little fairy embroidering at the casement of her new chamber ; from the bottom of your garden you will still hear her cheerful notes. She will continue to deck the church, as she has done, on Sundays and festivals. We will dine with you, all of us, four times a week ; and in winter we will pass all our evenings by your fireside. We will manage so, that you will not even perceive that Catherine has changed her abode."

"It's all very well !" cried the old pastor, shaking his head sadly ; "but it will no longer be the same thing."

"And then, monsieur le curé, think with what joy you will baptise your grand-nephews !—will feel a covey of fresh little fairies spring up around you, and pulling you by the cassock. How they will love you, and how you will spoil them ! What pretty surprises you will contrive for them,—without reckoning those of New Year's Day—a vest here, a pair of trowsers there ! Oh, I will be bound you will make them presents enough. And what a patriarchal future it will be ; in an evening, when all are met, ranged in a circle round your chair, listening to your Holy Word, whilst the worthy Martha is knitting worsted stockings for their little feet ! Never, no never have you been so happy as you will be."

"It's all very well," repeated François Paty, "but it will not be the same thing. But come," cried he, "of what consequence to an old wall, about to tumble away, is the last ray that gilds it ? To the old, unprotected oak, which will sink with the next blast, of what consequence is the linnet which sings amidst its withered branches ? Noirel, prepare your son for the happiness which awaits him : before a month shall have passed away, Claude shall be the husband of my niece."

At these words, the churchwarden had great difficulty in refraining from pressing his curé in his arms. When they separated, Claude and Catherine had not yet returned ; each sat up in their dwellings waiting for them,—François Paty sad and thoughtful, and Master Noirel, not feeling himself quite at ease, amused himself with reckoning, beforehand, how much, properly sold, the embroideries of the little fairy would bring, one year with another.

The pastor was beginning to be uneasy at the protracted

absence of his niece, when he heard the step of Annette upon the pavement of the yard, and almost immediately he saw Catherine enter, and looking so lovely, that, after kissing her, he stood and silently contemplated her. In truth, love and happiness had heightened her beauty to unusual brilliancy. She had passed, within an hour, from the graces of childhood to the full blossom of youth. It was no longer the little fairy or the little maiden, but a young and noble creature, whose soul had just opened upon life. She appeared as if enveloped in that warm atmosphere which visibly shines over the fields during the heats of summer. Her bosom was agitated; her eyes swam in humid brilliancy. All the joys of her being glowed upon her brow and in her countenance. And amongst all this, there was something of the simple astonishment experienced by Psyche, when she received the first kiss of love. It was late; François Paty put off what he had to say till the morrow, and Catherine, stealing away from the eager inquiries of Martha, shut herself up in her chamber, more triumphant than a miser who bolts his door and prepares to feast his eyes with his treasures. Her first movement when alone was to fall on her knees and thank God in her heart. What had she to do with the future? She loved, and was beloved,—Catherine asked no more!

An hour after, Claude returned to the village, more sombre than usual, but now serious and resolved. He went straight home, without even stopping under Catherine's window, as he was accustomed to do. To gain his chamber, he had necessarily to pass through that of his father,—besides, the latter was watching his return. As soon as he perceived him,—

"There you are at length, then, do-nothing!" cried he. "It is lucky for you, you have a father to look after your affairs whilst you are idly rambling about the country. What will you give me, you good-for-nothing fellow, if, within a month, you espouse the niece of our curé?"

"Father," replied Claude, with firmness of air which neither wanted nobleness nor dignity, "I now make a solemn engagement to henceforth perform my duties with the most rigorous exactitude, and to conduct myself so that from this hour you shall never have to complain of your son. I will attend to my school regularly; and if I have scandalized my young pupils by my distractions, I mean to edify them by giving them an example of application and assiduity. But that shall not be all the efforts I will make to please you. I will endeavour to recover, at the *lutrin*, the voice of which you were so proud. I will never hold out my hand to you for a brass farthing. I eat but little; I shall

eat less. I will wear my old clothes threadbare. I will go barefooted, if you desire it. And as the price of all this submission, I only ask one thing—and that is, that you leave me in peace, and never speak of marrying me.”

This said, the brave lad passed on firmly to his chamber, leaving his father struck with as great astonishment as if, on opening his paillasse, he had not found his crowns.

“You shall marry, you hang-dog!” cried he, through the wainscot.

“I will not marry!” replied Claude, undressing himself.

“I tell you you shall marry!”

“And I tell you that I will not marry!”

“I have given my word!”

“You must retract it.”

“I will disinherit you!”

“Do, father.”

“I will give you my malediction.”

“Good!” said Claude, smothering himself up in the bed-clothes; “then you won’t die without giving me something.”

Father Noirel continued to launch abuse, which fell harmless against the pillow of Claude, for he did not even take the trouble to make any rejoinder; so that, weary of the contest, the churchwarden, enraged with anger, was obliged to finish by going to bed.

The next morning Catherine was awake and stirring by dawn. All were still asleep in the village and the presbytery. Having dressed herself in haste, she stole noiselessly out of the house, and gained the open fields. She saw the sun rise, and it appeared to her as if she was present for the first time at the magnificent spectacle of his awaking. She lent her ear to the vague murmurs which ascended from the hollow of the valleys, and she seemed to hear the concerts of nature for the first time. To view her transports and enchantments, it might be supposed that she had certainly blown, like a flower, in the night, or that, at least, some new senses had developed themselves in her suddenly. So, when fresh from the hands of God, Eve must have mingled her soul with the young creation. She arrived, without thinking of it, perhaps, at the cross-roads where, by the light of the stars, she had in one word made the gift of her whole life. There she seated herself on a bank, beside a ditch, and, like a child who leans over a rivulet to look at its own image, she leant over her heart to look there at the image of Roger.

She was much too happy to be able to suspect that she was

wrong. How was it possible she could mistrust a sentiment which raised her in her own eyes, and only served to exalt the noblest instincts of her nature? What could she suppose, but that the sentiment came to her from heaven? She believed so, and had reason to believe so. It did not even enter her mind that she ought to be silent about it, or conceal it. Thus, therefore, as soon as the sun had begun to shorten the shadows of the trees, she rose to go and tell all to her uncle, more joyous and not less serene than if she were going to show him a diamond she had picked up in the grass of the road.

She arrived thus at the cure; but, when in presence of François Paty, who was walking pensively in the walks of his garden, she sought in vain for words to express that which at a distance appeared so easy to be said, and, blushing, hesitating, and stammering, she was able to do no more than sink into the arms that were expanded to receive her.

With any experience of the passion, the pastor would have comprehended at once what was passing in the heart of his niece; but he had never known but one love, the love of God. Accustomed to the chaste effusions of that tender and affectionate nature, he suspected nothing; he saw nothing but a burst of tenderness in the movement which had just thrown Catherine passionately upon his breast. He drew her towards the arbour of hops and honeysuckles, and then, seating himself beside her, he took both her hands in his, and remained for several seconds looking at her in silence, with a sad but mild aspect. The young girl had no doubt that her secret was already found out; she believed the whole universe must be in the secret of her happiness. Trembling, not with fear, but with joy, she awaited, smiling, the sentence of her judge. What had she to dread? Her conscience was as pure as the heavens; and now Roger loved her, all that she had loved before him became more dear to her.

"My daughter," said the pastor at length, "when your mother died, I took you, little as you were, in my hands, and offering you to God, I implored Him to bless you. Unless you were already marked with the divine seal, my prayer must have reached Him. I have seen you grow up like a lily; my dwelling has been embellished by the serenity of your brow, and the pure whiteness of your soul. Your presence, rather than my piety, has made this roof agreeable to the Lord. Oh, my child, be not astonished, then, if I speak to you with sadness of that which will secure your happiness. How can the day in which you will quit his house be a happy day for your old uncle?"

"Quit' you, my uncle!" cried Catherine. "Ah! whatever it may be, lie upon that happiness which could separate me from you!"

"You love me, then, a little? You are a little attached to me?" asked François Paty, more agitated and affected than he was willing to appear to be.

"Oh! my friend—my father!" cried the young girl, throwing her arms round his neck, and pressing his silvered brow with her ruddy lips. "You ask me if I love you! What have you against me, and what have I done, that you should speak to me thus?"

"God is my judge that I have never doubted of your amiable young heart! But, my Catherine, you are no longer a little girl, and Heaven is not willing that your destiny should be consumed in the shade of this presbytery. You have other joys to know, and other duties to fulfil. In a word, since you love one another, you must be married, my children."

"Married! my uncle!" cried the little maiden, who felt at this word all her blood mount to her face.

"Yes, doubtless," replied the old man.

"Oh! I now comprehend," cried Catherine, "what I have often heard you say in the pulpit—that marriage is holy, and that it comes to us from God. To love one another, to be united in the face of heaven, to take one another by the hand, to pass through good and evil days, never to quit each other, to have everything in common, to support one another in misfortune, to better each other, to encourage each other to good, to seek together the good and the beautiful, the true and the just, to arrive thus at the same end by the same road, to be united more closely still, and end by being confounded together in the bosom of the Divinity,—oh! my uncle, you are right; that is all that can be found most adorable and divine upon earth! But," added she almost directly—and all the anxieties of her mind were painted in her look—"do you think his father will consent to it?"

"Child!" replied François Paty, with a feeling of tenderness and pride, "who would not be happy and proud to call you his daughter? Young angel, who would not open his door to you with joy? What family would not be eager to make a place for you at the family hearth, pious and charming creature as you are?"

"But truly, uncle, do you think he will consent?"

"It is already done," said François Paty, smiling; "although rather too fond of the goods of this world, he is a man, at bottom,

who only desires the happiness of his son. He not only gives his consent, but it was he who solicited mine."

"He, my uncle!"

"He himself."

"And you—and you, my uncle,—do you wish it?"

"I wish that my Catherine should accomplish her destiny," replied the pastor, kissing her brow. "I am desirous that when leaving this world I should feel that she was supported by a noble and faithful heart."

"Oh! his is a noble heart!" cried Catherine, with exultation.

"I know it is, I know it is," replied François Paty, in a tone of profound conviction; "he is an honest lad, and will make an excellent husband. Whatever his father may say, I think he is neither handsome nor brilliant; but I am rather pleased than grieved at that. He has essential qualities; he is, as they say in the country, gold in the bar in a piece of coarse woollen."

At these words the little fairy started, and pricked up her ears, like a doe in the forest, which has seen the brambles move.

"I must confess to you," continued the curé, "that this marriage has been agreed upon a long time, between his father and me. It is eight years ago since you and Claude, without knowing anything of the matter, were affianced to each other. I augur well of this union. Pious, steady, laborious, economical,—it is impossible that the Eternal should not bless your home. It is well that you, my dear girl, should love Claude sufficiently to take him for a husband. That proves that you do not stop at the envelope—that you go to the bottom of things. You have as much good sense as grace; you are as prudent as you are handsome. It is, besides, the only match in this country that would suit my Catherine. You are both poor; but the poor are rich who love one another, and who, at the same time, cherish God and labour. Work, pray, and love each other—that is the whole secret of life."

He might have continued to talk thus till night, without running any risk of being interrupted. Like a dove struck in her flight, and which falls from the azure plains of the heavens into a mass of brambles and thistles, the little maiden, mortally wounded, had cast down her head, and two large tears rolled down her pallid cheeks. With a single glance she had measured the abyss which separated the affianced bride of Claude and the son of the Comte des Songères; upon touching the reality, she

had comprehended the nothingness of her dreams, and the folly of her love.

"Well, you are weeping, and do not answer me," said François Paty, all at once, drawing her softly to his breast.

Catherine quickly concealed her face in the bosom of her uncle, and there, no longer able to contain herself, she allowed her despair full way in a torrent of tears.

"What ails thee, my child? what ails thee?" cried the pastor, quite at a loss. "But now your heart seemed to expand with joy, and now it breaks out in cries of grief. Have I touched, without knowing it, any painful point of your soul? Have you sorrows that I am unacquainted with? Speak, speak, my daughter; confide in your old friend."

Catherine was on the point of confessing all. It was part of her correct and frank nature not to act otherwise. Her tears proved it so; the source of them was transparent; and not to discover the love which had bloomed, like a lotus, at the bottom of it, required all the blindness of this simple and candid old man. About to tell all, she was prevented by the fear of seeing the last thread broken by which she held hope. And then, why should she disturb, by confessions, to say the least of them, useless, the confidence of that angelic old man, together with the peace of his latter days? In fact, in the heart of a young girl, first love has such timid and mysterious bashfulness that it permits at most the hand of a mother to raise the triple veil with which its chaste nudity envelopes itself.

"Well, dear uncle, I am resolved," said she, "everything considered, that I will not be married. You have said truly, Claude is a good and worthy young man; he loves me, and I also love him; but there still is a wide difference between the friendship I entertain for him and the pious love I bear you. I have no doubt my friend Claude would make an excellent husband; but it is not sufficiently clear to me that I have within me the requisites for an excellent wife, and since I pass generally for a good little girl, I should be wrong if I abandoned a part which I fill to the satisfaction of my audience, to undertake another in which I might have less success. Now, is not that your opinion? In the first place, I should die of *ennui* under the roof of M. Noirel. Let me remain here as I have done. Do I burden you, dear uncle? Only consider; if I were not here, you would find the house too large for you; it's of no use talking of our living next door,—you would mourn over the joys of your life. Now, is not that which I say true, uncle? Is it not true that when you were without your little fairy in your home, you

would miss something? And then, observe, I am not certain that I am born to enjoy the felicities of domestic life. I love the open air, the fields, and liberty too dearly. So you see that decidedly the little fairy will not marry.

"But, my daughter," François Paty could not help observing, "it appears to me that you did not hold this language just now?"

"Just now, dear uncle? What did I say just now?"

And, overcome by the effort she had made to constrain herself, the poor girl again burst into tears. In vain the pastor insisted, in vain he objected that he had passed his word, in vain he represented to his niece that he was getting old, that he might die every instant, and that this case failing, he should leave her without assistance or support; Catherine still held high and firmly the banner of the little maiden. Just at this point of the discussion, the nose of Father Noirel peeped round the corner of the path. Not knowing to what saint to apply in his distress, and believing the pastor absent, he came to supplicate the young girl to join him, like a new Aricia, to triumph over the disdains and resistance of the Hippolytus. On perceiving each other, the curé and the churchwarden felt a little confused, for they began to understand that, like the man in the fable who sold the bear-skin before he had caught the bear, they had engaged to put two birds into the same cage before they had taken them in their net. Now, as they could not know they were in the same situation, they accosted each other in a sufficiently embarrassed manner, the churchwarden rubbing his chin, the curé scratching his ear. Catherine had fled away. After a little roundabout mystification, they at length arrived at mutual confidence, and the good curé, who was not sorry at bottom, to keep his niece a short time longer with him, laughed heartily at the *dénouement* of the adventure.

"So," cried he gaily, "Claude will not have Catherine, and Catherine will have nothing to do with Claude. According to this, there will be nothing wanting at the nuptials but the bride and bridegroom. Come, neighbour Noirel, it is not worth while troubling ourselves about such a trifle. Don't you see, that there is some little love quarrel at the bottom of all this, which a breath may remove? Before a month is over—before a week, who knows?—perhaps before the cock of the steeple shall have turned upon its pivot, these silly heads will have changed their opinions."

"Monsieur le curé," said Noirel, who seldom laughed, "you do not know my son. I do not think there is in the three

kingdoms a more obstinate mule than the unhappy Claude. When he fastens upon an idea—I must confess that such things occur but seldom—the devil in person would not be able to make him let go of it.”

“You will see,” said François Paty, “that Dame Nature has taken the pains to model your son of very peculiar clay! I have read—I don’t know where—when I was young—and that is a long time ago,—I have read, or have been told, that when two lovers quarrel, it is time to light the wax-candles and order the priest. In truth, Noirel, there can be no need for the curé to speak of such cases to his churchwarden.”

At these words, having mounted Annette, whom he had saddled as he was talking, he set out at the gentle pace of the animal, to go and visit two or three of his parishioners. He was scarcely out of the village before his mind was relieved from what had passed, and he rode on, dreaming and smiling, listening to his own soul, which conversed in silence with Nature and his God.

In the meanwhile, Martha was busy at her washing, and Catherine found herself alone in the presbytery. In accordance with the solemn engagement made the evening before with her father, Claude was attending bravely to his class; he had already placed on their knees, in the middle of the school, decorated with superb asses-ears, at least half a dozen of the little vagabonds, who, reckoning upon the habitual distraction of the master, had given way to the gaiety of their age and the playful folly of their characters. Although the head of Catherine was to be seen occasionally through the windows of the cure, the stoical young man had not once opened his door the least in the world, nor pressed his burning brow to the window. For one instant he was seen to become pale and to start,—that was on hearing a horse come up at a gallop, and stop before the presbytery. The boys, who were watching with impatience for this moment of weakness and forgetfulness, rose *en masse* to take advantage of it; but, reseizing immediately, with a vigorous hand, the reins of his will, Claude nailed his pupils to their forms with an Olympian look. It was thus, and on this day that the muse of the alphabet returned victorious to the sanctuary from which Love, “the lord of folded arms,” as Shakespeare calls him, had too long exiled him.

The horse which had just stopped in the place of the church, at the door of the presbytery, was, as may have been supposed, Roger’s.

Roger arrived intoxicated with joy; he was received by

Catherine in the garden, equally intoxicated with grief, calm, however, and already strong in the resolution she had formed without hesitation, in accordance with her pious and open nature.

"Oh, my Roger!" said she, after having seated herself by him on the grassy bench, upon which had faded away, like a palace of mist, the lovely edifice of a happiness scarcely a few hours old,—“oh, my Roger! we must separate,—we see each other here for the last time. I told you yesterday that I loved you—and it is true—I do love you. How could I avoid it? I knew nothing, I foresaw nothing—I loved you; and when I told you so, I had not then told it to myself. I told you so, and I do not repent of it. If God reads in my heart, surely He is satisfied with me; if He listens to me it is without anger. Be gone, however, it must be so. I am not culpable in loving you; I should be so in not ceasing to see you. If our souls are sisters, our destinies are not alike. You are son of the Comte des Songères,—you are noble, you are rich; you are everything, alas! and I am nothing. Adieu, then, young friend, almost as soon lost as found. Let us thus preserve our love in its innocence and purity, so that your heart may remember it, and mine may never be cured of it.”

“Catherine,” replied Roger, “I do not know whether I am noble and rich,—I do not inquire whether you are or are not. Although I preceded you in life, I am almost a stranger in it, at least, as much as you. What I, however, know, allow me to tell you. My mother died when I had scarcely left my cradle. I grew up in sadness, far from my country, without one kiss of my father being pressed upon my brow, without my ever having received an affectionate word from his lips. My father married again, and in the new family I was but an importunate guest. On finding myself free in the midst of this poor country, of which I had preserved but a faint remembrance, I thought I was at length about to live. My arms expanded in a kind of wild intoxication; but I embraced nothing but vacancy; and that liberty which I had hailed with cries of joy, only served to make me feel with more bitterness the isolation of my youth. It was then you appeared to me in the glory of a May day. You were weeping; I fancied I saw the spring born beneath the dew which fell from your eyes. Your voice passed over my heart like the breeze over the tall grass from which my dogs had made you spring up like a fawn. When you smiled, all nature smiled with you. You at first appeared to me only like a child; I thought I only admired in you the simple graces of the first days of adolescence. And yet, not knowing why, I peopled my solitude

with your image; without suspecting it, I mixed it with all creation. From that time the fields yielded mysteries and enchantments to me that I had never suspected. I listened; I appeared to comprehend what the wind said to the woods, the Creuse to its banks, the lark to the dawn, the nightingale to the night. I saw you again, and soon that love which was alive in me, without knowing itself, or being aware where to place itself, fell upon you who had awakened it. I loved you. In my situation, how could I avoid it? You had the grace and beauty which make piety more sweet; you had the piety which makes grace and beauty more charming. I had till that time upon all things nothing but confused ideas, and uncertain notions; at the same time with happiness you taught me virtue. In loving you, I learnt to love God and the poor, who are His children, in preference. While touching my heart, you made to issue from it at the same glance the springs of tenderness and those of benevolence. It was not only you that I loved; all that surrounded you became dear and sacred to me. I as insensibly arrived at no longer living but of your life. I loved this village, the house which sheltered you, and the church where I prayed for you. Above all, I loved your uncle with an affection very uncommon. To add to so many attractions, it was near you I first heard speak of my mother; and I enveloped you both in one same feeling of respect and adoration. Thus everything became changed in my existence. I had a family, I loved, I was beloved, for I already felt beneath my own love yours germinating in silence. And now, when I have seen it bloom upon your lips, and nothing is henceforth wanting for my felicity, you would have me leave you, never to see you again! You speak of separating! Catherine, if you love me, how happens it that you can speak to me in that way?"

"Oh, my friend!" replied Catherine; "what is love, if I love you not? My very life dates from the day when first I saw you. I neither knew who you were, nor if ever I were to see you again; and yet I felt at once the whole of my being pass into yours. Your smiling image followed my every step. The sound of your voice was in the air; in the azure of the heavens I found again the blue of your eyes. You told me your name, and from that hour, at all times, I could hear that sweet name singing in my heart,—it is true that to that time I was but a child. On seeing you again, my soul was elevated, my spirit grew, and I understood that I was ready for joy or grief. I again saw you, and I entirely ceased to belong to myself. To expect you, to see you, to expect you again,—that was all my existence. I only existed in you, by

you, for you; and yet I took a fresh ardour in cherishing all that had before been dear to me. There was within me, as it were, an immense focus of charity, of which you were the luminous centre, and which would have wished to be able to spread its rays over the rest of the world. Oh! my friend! if I love you not, tell me; ah! tell me, what you call love!"

Whilst she was speaking thus, Roger looked at her with an expression of unspeakable tenderness; and to see him thus contemplating her and listening to her in mute adoration, it might be said that he was gathering one by one, like pearls, into his heart, the words which fell from the lips of that charming creature.

"You love me," replied he with sadness; "but you acknowledge that you can live without me."

"I know nothing of it," replied she; "I have never yet tried my strength. Perhaps I am still too young to die. And then, think of my old uncle. Besides, in losing you I shall not lose love; I shall live upon that to my last hour, and will render it up to God, as young and as pure as I received it."

"But, Catherine," asked the young man, "will you never marry, then?"

"Never, Roger, never!"

"And yet," replied he, sinking down along the bank upon which the young girl was sitting; "if I knelt at your feet, if I took your two hands in mine, and as if my whole life depended upon one of your looks, and I were to say to you in a supplicating voice,—Before God, and before man, will you be my wife, Catherine?—answer me, Catherine,—would you not?"

While speaking thus, he had knelt at the feet of the little maiden; he had taken her two hands in his; his voice was supplicating, and his whole life seemed to hang upon the looks of the beautiful girl.

"Your wife! Oh, my God!" murmured Catherine, in a faint voice.

"My wife! yes, my wife!—my dearly-beloved wife!" repeated Roger, covering the hands he held with passionate kisses.

Like a too fragile shrub, which bends under the shower which had refreshed its thirsty branches, Catherine stooped her head over the brow of her young lover; but rising immediately, and tearing herself away, pale and trembling, from the embrace which entwined her,—

"Begone! begone!" cried she. "Why should you show me even a glimpse of a destiny to which I am not born? Ah! God is my witness, I never even dreamt of such a thing. You know it, Lord; you know that my ambition never strayed so high;

you know that in loving him, I asked for nothing, not even his love. Begone, Roger! begone Roger, Vicomte des Songères! What can there be in common between you and the niece of a poor village curé?"

"Catherine!" cried the young man, with firmness; "the only question here is between two young people, who love each other, and are already united in the face of heaven. Answer me then frankly and sincerely, as becomes the loyalty of your character,—answer me as if we were both born in a château, or in a thatched cottage: I believe that my happiness consists in you; on your side, do you think your happiness resides in me?"

"But, Roger, that cannot be; I know many things of which you are ignorant. Remember what my uncle told us, one evening, when we were all three walking along the banks of the river. I have no doubt of your sincerity; I believe that you love me well enough to wish to have me for the companion of your days,—be blessed a thousand times for it! Perhaps I am not unworthy of such a great felicity; but, I repeat it to you, it cannot be. You ought to know your father well enough, to be certain that from the present moment——"

"My father has nothing to do with this," cried Roger, proudly, and interrupting Catherine. "If he has his will, I have mine; I am free, and will prove it. Again, once more, answer me as if you and I had no other judge or master but the God who sees and hears us."

"I love you," replied Catherine.

"But do you esteem me sufficiently to confide to me the charge of your life? Would it please you to share my destiny,—happy or fatal, serene or troubled? In short, will you have me for a husband, as I wish to have you for a wife?"

"I love you," repeated Catherine, with a soft assurance.

"Come, then, to my heart, my young and beauteous spouse!" cried Roger, folding in his fond arms the slender, flexible form of the little fairy.

Catherine leant her languishing head upon the bosom of Roger; while he, casting down upon her the look of a protector, appeared in the sun's ray, which played along his brow, like an angel sheltering under his wings the creature of whom God had just given him charge.

They had resumed their places on the bank of turf; they there remained till evening,—their hands interlaced, mingling their chaste transports, and composing together the poem of their destiny. What pretty projects, and what smiling hopes! They sat there, both young and beautiful, loving and delightful, taking

possession of the future ; disposing of it according to their fancy ; interrupting their schemes to look at each other, or to repeat how dearly they loved,—like two birds which build their nest billing along the bushes. Roger believed himself rich from his mother's property ; he did not doubt that the Comte des Songères, before he set out for Germany, would resign to him the De Bigny estate, —too happy to be able, at such a price, to get rid of his son and the guardianship account he had to render him. It was there, in that domain, where they had met and seen each other for the first time, that they promised to conceal their loves ; and to live unknown, far from the world, without pomp, doing good around them. Catherine would be near her uncle, whom she could visit every day ; besides, Roger talked of building a church and a presbytery at Bigny, in which François Paty should come and live. Catherine saw nothing to prevent it ; everything appeared easy to their young imaginations. They would dismiss Robineau ; not from a spirit of revenge, but because the old steward was harsh to the poor, and was inhospitable. They would install Paquerette at the château. Father Redigois should be able to put a hen in the pot on a Sunday, and should have nothing more to do with messieurs the officers. The vicar was loaded with new surplices and cassocks. The good Saint Sylvain, whom they never tired of blessing, for he was the cause of all that had come to pass,—the good Saint Sylvain was to have a magnificent banner of velvet with silver fringes. Carps and geese came in showers into the kitchen of the good Martha. Claude and father Noirel were not forgotten ;—the father inherited the charge of Robineau, and the son was to become churchwarden without opposition. Annette, the faithful Annette, was to have straw up to her chest and corn up to her eyes. But that was not all. They changed the condition of the soil, by bettering the cultivation of it. The land which had hitherto produced nothing but buck-wheat, chestnuts and colza, was covered with mulberry-trees, vines, wheat, and barley : I even think that a few orange-trees were to be seen here and there. In short, they realized, within a circle of ten leagues, all the dreams of the age of gold. Catherine's opinion was, that without longer delay they should tell her uncle everything ; Roger thought it would be more prudent not to impart anything to him till after the return of his father, when the obstacles would be removed, and there would remain nothing for the pastor to do but to bless the loves of his two children. They would spare themselves much trouble by this, on both sides. Although it was repugnant to her to conceal anything from her old friend, Catherine ended by yielding to the reasons

Roger urged. Besides, the Comte des Songères, being expected daily, the mystery would not be prolonged beyond a week. If Roger omitted speaking of his aunt and cousin, it may be believed that it was only from a fear of alarming his affianced bride; the fact was, he did not think about it, and the idea of the ladies of Barnajon did not disturb, for a single instant, the serenity of his heart. He set out before Martha and the curé returned. Catherine ran to the window of her chamber to see him pass on horseback. They again bade each other adieu, by gestures and looks; then, when the young man had disappeared, at the turning of the road, the little maiden went back to the bottom of the garden, certainly very happy, but yet sad,—for her happiness was too great not to be mixed with inquietude.

She had been plunged for nearly an hour in a half-smiling revery, when she heard the leaves rustle near her, and on turning round, perceived Claude, earnestly looking at her. As she thought it was he who had urged his father to ask her in marriage, she did not hesitate to express her ill-humour on the subject.

"Oh! it's you, is it?" said she, at once. "I am very glad not to have to retain any longer something that has been upon my mind since morning. In the first place, I declare that I will not have you for a husband; in the next, I think that instead of addressing yourself to my uncle or your father, you ought to have begun by asking my consent; and, in short, I am compelled to confess to you that I am tired of your troublesome importunities. What do you want? One can see nobody but you! One cannot stir a step without meeting you! You are everywhere, except in your school, where you ought to be."

"Catherine," repeated Claude mildly, "you seem very cruel to the companion of your childhood."

"That is true; I am wrong; pardon me," said she, holding out her hand to him; "but how could the idea come into your head of marrying me? I ask you, what could that add to our affection? Am I not your sister? and are you not my brother? Since when has it been the fashion for brother and sister to marry? Come, be reasonable. I am not the person that would suit you. You should have what they call a fine woman,—tall Nannette, for instance; now, she would be the very thing. I am too slender, and too short. I should do you no credit; and people would jeer at us in the country round. Now, look, it is as much as I can do to take your arm. Why, they would say you had married the fairy Nabette. And, then, be candid,—put your hand upon your heart, and say, is it love you feel for me? Leave off, then.

I warn you fairly, for my part, that I have not a shadow of love for you,—unless friendship be the shadow of love, as I believe it may be.”

“I know it full well,” replied Claude, with a resigned air; “I know, Catherine, that you do not love me; therefore, it was not I who made my father ask you of your uncle. I was not consulted about it; so much otherwise, I have declared plainly that I would not marry. You have just now called me your brother. Listen then, my sister, to what I am about to say to you, for we shall meet but seldom hereafter,—you shall have no occasion to complain of my troublesome importunities. I am come to bid you farewell, Catherine; not that I am at present prepared to depart, but I am about to retire from your presence, until I disappear altogether. When you shall be happy, and poor Claude will have no more to do for you, then I will quit the country, and go wherever God may direct my steps. From this time to that, you shall no longer meet me in your way; but you shall still find me at hand. If you stand in need of me, a word, a gesture, a look, and I will come. May you never have cause to call upon me! May I soon depart—carrying with me your happiness instead of my own! Farewell, then! Be not angry with me for disturbing your sweet joys by my presence. I was jealous, because I understood nothing; now that I understand all, I am but miserable and unhappy.”

Thereupon, the worthy youth departed with lingering steps,—his head cast down, and his hands in his pockets. Catherine followed him for some time with her eyes; then, after brushing off with the back of her hand a tear which glittered at the end of her long eyelash, she resumed her thoughts of Roger.

Roger galloped towards Bigny,—less intoxicated with love than with liberty; less joyous at the idea of marrying Catherine, than triumphant at having at length acted in an independent and manly way. Strange thing, this!—the love apart, which urged him on to break the yoke which weighed so heavily on him, and to prove to himself that he was free, this boy had just cast himself headlong into marriage. So life passes in pursuit of liberty, and does nothing but make an exchange of chains. Full of impetuosity and ardour, spurring his horse’s sides, and flitting like an arrow across the fields, he appeared to be flying to the conquest of the world. Nevertheless, when compelled to relax his speed, and he found himself in the open fields, beneath the cool mantle of night, being no longer exalted by the presence of the little fairy, he could not resist a feeling of surprise and stupor, when thinking of the solemn engagement he had contracted. He felt

himself in the position of a man who, the vapours of wine being dispersed, seeks to recall, with a vague sentiment of terror, what he has said and done in a state of intoxication. It is true, that on setting out in the morning for Saint-Sylvain, the young man had no doubt that it was his duty, on that day, to, as the poets said formerly, engage himself to be bound in the bonds of Hymen. He loved Catherine with a sincere, poetical, and delightful love; therefore he had never asked himself whither it would lead him. He loved by chance and at hazard, as we love travelling at twenty, when the horizons appear endless, and we know not whither we are going. When we have traversed all the cross-roads, and tasted the sour wines of all the roadside cabarets,—when we have cast our youth to the winds, left our wool upon all the bushes, and begin to long secretly for the sweets of repose, it may be delightful to discover, at the turning of a hedge, the smoke of the domestic roof, and, upon the door-sill, the family, which smiles on opening its arms to receive us. But to meet, at the first stage, Messire Hymen, armed with his flambeaux, who bars our passage, and cries,—“Halt, there! you shall go no further!” it must be admitted that the rencontre is not one of the most amusing, however little taste we may have for the unknown or secret instincts which urge us on towards the hills of the verdant Bohemia. Such were not precisely the reflections to which Roger gave himself up; only there came an instant in which the young vicomte was obliged to acknowledge that he had lightly undertaken a more serious affair than he had at first contemplated. Let us hasten to add that this was but a flash. He loved Catherine; he fully appreciated all that Heaven had given her of grace, beauty, innocence, and purity. The little maiden and all that surrounded her had only exercised beneficent influences over him. He represented her to himself as he had seen her, the evening before, by the light of the stars, palpitating in his arms, pale with happiness and love. His senses became troubled at these recollections; spurring on his horse afresh, with his heart at a gallop, he said to himself, that even if his father were to burst with rage and spite, the niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain should be Châtelaine of Bigny and Vicomtesse des Songères.

At Bigny, as at Saint-Sylvain, the days which followed were not exempt from secret agitations. Catherine and Roger continued to see each other, but most frequently in the presence of Martha and François Paty; and it was with difficulty that they could, from time to time, exchange a few words secretly. Catherine suffered from this state of things,—it was repugnant to all her sentiments of propriety and honesty. Twenty times was she

on the point of pouring out her heart into the bosom of her uncle, and was deterred less by the fear of displeasing Roger than that of rendering the old pastor uneasy. She could no longer raise her eyes to his countenance; she avoided his caresses, and stole away to weep in private. She shunned Martha likewise, and had no liking for anything but solitude. When alone, she could at least find refuge in her love; and yet that love itself was filled with dark apprehensions. According to the accounts made by the good curé, she knew the Comte des Songères better than his son knew him; she foresaw obstacles that Roger could not or would not see. One day, when they were alone in the garden,—

“Roger,” said she, “whence comes it that my happiness is of so sad a character? Can it be that all happiness is so? I have faith in your vows; I believe in you as in God himself, and yet I am sad to death! The air is calm, the sky is clear, and yet I tremble as if at the approach of a storm! In truth, my friend, I feel that we are preparing for ourselves a future of evils and miseries. It is not for myself I tremble; I would willingly pay with the repose of my whole life for the glory of having been beloved by you for one day. I do not retreat before my own grief; but before yours, before my uncle’s, I confess that I am a coward, without strength or courage, and overcome with fear. Reflect, Roger; there is still time. Perhaps you have only given way to the impetuosity of the moment? Remember that I should die the most unhappy of creatures, if I were to surprise upon your brow, or in your looks, the least regret at having met with me on your life’s way. Think of everything; tell yourself that I am but a poor little girl, without fortune and without education. Tell yourself that, in order to marry me, you will have to contend with your father, who will never consent to it; and that when you shall have married me, you will be bound to extend to me so much the more love and tenderness for my feeling myself unworthy of the rank in which you have placed me, of the name you shall have bestowed upon me! Oh! my friend, how serious all this is! Think of it, think of my old uncle; above all, think of yourself; and if you hesitate but for an instant, go, Roger, and return no more. I will not blame you; never shall a complaint against you issue from that heart which your image will never cease to occupy wholly.”

These words only served to exalt Roger’s love; the idea that there could exist a doubt of his energy and his will was quite sufficient to precipitate him into an extreme. Roger had but one regret, and that was that the obstacles which alarmed the *imagination* of the little fairy were not more serious, and quite

insurmountable—he would have broken and surmounted them. To re-assure Catherine, he had recourse to words of flame. He was young, in love, and sincere; without effort, he was eloquent. The young girl only asked to be persuaded and convinced. The splendour of youth reappeared upon her cheeks—her soul opened again sweetly to hope.

The intrepid confidence which he thus endeavoured to infuse into the mind of Catherine, Roger really entertained himself. Ready for the struggle, he could not admit that it was possible he should not come out of it a conqueror. It is the faculty of youth and love to doubt of nothing. If Roger had had to displace the mountains of La Marche, and change the course of the Creuse, he would have felt no more fear. With Catherine as his *point d'appui*, he esteemed himself strong enough to move the globe.

And yet, when he observed what was going on in the château, the young man also felt a secret inquietude buzzing round his heart. In less than a fortnight, the old mansion of Bigny had been revived from bottom to top. To see the embellishments it had undergone, a poet would have cried out profanation, a citizen would have swooned with pleasure. The whole façade was scraped and whitened with lime; the disjointed stones of the *perron* had been drawn together and cemented; the great weeds had been carefully pulled up in the court, and had been replaced by a layer of fine yellow sand. In the interior, furniture of pale sandre and citron had succeeded the old fauteuils and chests of oak. Two apartments, in particular, which looked out upon the least gloomy part of the park, exceeded the rest in the elegance of their decorations. All the refinements of luxury and comfort were there united. The grand saloon, on the ground-floor, entirely repaired, glittered with gilding, mirrors, and crystals. The piano, arrived from Paris, there presided with the dignity of a king in a throne-room. All the floors were concealed beneath carpets of Aubusson, which ran up the stairs, and even along the dark corridors. If the escutcheons of the family arms had not been everywhere preserved, it might have been believed to be a hotel of recent date, built at great expense in the Chaussée d'Antin, by some modern Turcaret. Not a book, not a picture, not one true object of art; but in revenge, all that the magazines of an upholsterer could exhibit in the nineteenth century, of the richest and the most sumptuous. At the same time, the *personnel* of the household had undergone analogous restorations. Ploughboys were transformed into respectable lackeys. They came and went, hither and thither, all day under

the eye of Robineau, who trained his rustic tribe of footmen in all the arts of servility. Robineau himself had cast his skin, and took upon himself the steward of high degree. From morning till night, they raked the paths, extirpated the thistles, and thinned the clumps. A pupil of Carême's, sent from the capital, was busily preparing his stoves, and manœuvring an army of young cooks; and, lastly, a beautiful set of dappled-gray horses, and a stud of true Limousin breed, neighed and pawed in the stables, whilst a *calèche*, which had come by public conveyance, reposed in the coach-house, enveloped in its canvas case.

What was to be thought of all these preparations? Had the Comte des Songères any inclination to fix his residence at Bigny? Did Madame Barnajon his sister, and Mademoiselle Malvina his niece, intend to establish themselves there with him? Whence all these prodigalities, which were not at all in the taste of the master? To these questions, which he put to himself, Roger knew not what to reply; but he had a presentiment that something was preparing in opposition to his own projects. Unfortunately, no index appeared to put him in the right way. His father had always kept him ignorant of affairs in general, but particularly of his own. Roger did not at all know what interests had brought the comte to Bigny. He did not even suspect that a lawsuit placed the proprietorship of that domain in question. Although naturally proud and reserved, notwithstanding the sentiment of repulsion Robineau inspired in him, he ventured several times to interrogate him; but Robineau was impenetrable, and for some time, his arrogance had so much increased, that Roger was obliged to put a constraint upon himself, not to bring him roughly to a sense of his place. Despairing of drawing anything from this animal, who partook of the pedant and the serving-man, he thought it prudent to wait, without saying anything to Catherine, for fear of alarming her.

At Saint-Sylvain, things did not take a more gay or reassuring turn. When Roger was there, and near her, Catherine easily believed in her happiness; as soon as he was gone, the little maiden felt her confidence depart with him. Martha and François Paty had at length become aware of the change that had taken place in the disposition of their dear child. The good old man disturbed himself very little about it, persisting in thinking that it was only on account of some little love-pouting between her and Claude. Martha was very cautious not to say otherwise than monsieur le curé; but at bottom, the old nurse, though a hundred leagues off the truth, was not convinced that friend Claude went for much in this affair. Clear it was that

the presbytery had no longer the charm which pervaded and embellished it scarcely a month before. Movement and life seemed to threaten to retire from it altogether. Claude no longer showed his nose there. The window at which Martha and the little fairy formerly chatted so cheerfully remained closed whole days together. Catherine no longer hovered round her uncle; Claude no longer hovered round Catherine. The repasts were silent. François Paty read his breviary from one end to the other, without being interrupted by his niece. The presence of Roger alone brought back, from time to time, a little sunshine beneath the roof of the pastor. The village itself, since young Noirel had looked so assiduously after his school, wore a dull aspect, and was no longer animated by the breakings out of the boys. When delivered from the cares of his empire, Claude went to wander solitarily, like a dog which has lost his master; his dejected gait and his deeply sad countenance impressed upon the landscape I can scarcely say what of the morose and sorrowful. On his part, the churchwarden, who exhibited here and there a face of an ell long, did not contribute much to enliven the horizon.

In short, of all this little world, which we have seen so happy, there was nobody but Paquerette who had not lost their cheerfulness. She continued to live, as in the past, in the open air, barefooted, her dress half way up her leg, driving her amiable flock before her, with switch in hand and gaiety in her heart.

• CHAPTER X.

WHAT WAS GOING ON AT PARIS.

WHILST Roger, at Saint-Sylvain, was disposing of his heart, his hand, and his destiny, at Paris the Comte des Songères was disposing of the heart, the hand, and the destiny of Roger. This man, who represents in this village history the wolf whom Renard would have wished to see, from time to time, in the sheepfolds of Florian, was very much more of a fox than a wolf. But, to speak more correctly, he partook of the two; only that as long as he was young, the wolf dominated in him, but as he

grew old, the fox took the upper hand. He had become a singular mixture of suppleness and roughness, of cunning and brutality. When given up to his natural instincts, the wolf reappeared immediately; but when his interests required it, the fox had his turn, and the cunning fellow could have given lessons to the most artful of the race.

Perhaps my readers may have forgotten what enterprise the Comte des Songères had proposed to himself on coming to Paris. A boundless spendthrift in his youth, he had got rid of the fortune of which he was bound, some day, to render an account to his son. That day had arrived. If Roger had not yet claimed anything, it was still in his power to claim all at any instant. Besides, he was a constraint upon his father, who had nothing so much at heart as to get rid of him. At the same time, Madame Barnajon was disputing the proprietorship of Bigny with her dearly-beloved brother, who had been indebted in considerable sums to her for many years. At first the wolf had shown his teeth; but, after a time, the fox had imagined that a marriage between his niece and his son might put an end to all the difficulties. The Comte des Songères, then, had set out for Paris with the sole view of negotiating and bringing to a prosperous end this great affair, in which he hoped to acquit himself at one stroke, by the assistance of a domain in litigation, of the claims of both his son and his sister.

When arrived at Paris, his first care was to see his counsel, to consult the most renowned advocates and legists of the Palais. All agreed thereupon that the Comte des Songères had not more chances of losing his suit than he had of winning it. The comte asked for no more. With his consultations in his pocket, all signed by famous names, he presented himself at the house of Madame Barnajon, who did not expect him, and seemed less pleased than surprised at seeing him again. The interview commenced in a very icy manner; but, thanks to the astucy of the comte, the ice was, in the end, melted. Master wolf was entirely effaced; there remained nothing but gossip fox, who played his part charmingly, and emptied his sack of his tricks. Grave and sad at first, he soon became affectionate and tender; he carried this even so far as to appear moved, and shed some tears. To hear him, it might be supposed that he came from the depths of Germany to see if it were not possible to put an end to the divisions which had lasted so long. He spoke of his son affectionately, and of family ties like a man who feels them warmly. Madame Barnajon, while listening to her brother, recognized the truth of the proverb which says, that when the devil became old he

turned hermit. However, she held herself prudently on her guard, and declared with firmness that she was resolved to abide by her pretensions. The comte exclaimed loudly, was it necessary to disturb their first conversation with vile questions of interest? There was plenty of time to speak of that. He was resigned, for his part, to make any sacrifices, and withdraw from nothing that was likely to restore a good understanding between his sister and himself. All he required was a truce, to give them an opportunity of knowing each other better. This truce Madame Barnajon agreed to willingly, and from that day M. des Songères lived in close intimacy with his sister and his niece, observing them both in secret, studying the character of his niece, whom he had left in the cradle, and that of his sister, whom he had not seen for more than twenty years, initiating himself with address, and not without having the air of being touched by them, into their tastes and their ambitions, their position in the world, and all the details of their household,—neglecting nothing, saying, doing all that was necessary to flatter the weaknesses of mind of the mother, and to excite the aristocratic appetites of Mademoiselle Malvina Barnajon.

It was in the midst of these investigations, of these plans, and of these manœuvres, that he received the letter in which Robineau denounced the chaste loves of Roger and Catherine. The Comte des Songères could have no idea of the little maiden, who was only just born when he quitted the country. But, on the other hand, he was but too well acquainted with the curé of Saint-Sylvain; he remembered having, one night, in his wife's chamber, bowed his head and bent his knee beneath the word and the gesture of the pastor; he knew that he had a judge in that man; his hatred against him had not grown older by a day. At the name of François Paty, the wolf bounded with rage, as if the ball of the hunter had just lodged itself in his hide. But we should deceive ourselves strangely if we imagined that, on learning the love of Roger for Catherine, and of Catherine for Roger, he felt his irritation increase or his anger doubled. The fox congratulated himself, and licked his lips at it. Through the exaggerations of the steward's recital, he saw nothing but a *liaison*, in itself not serious, which he could break with ease, at his need; and as he never felt the passion but on its material and vulgar side, as he had never comprehended anything of the delicacies of the heart, any more than of the ideal pleasures of love, far from being alarmed, he wrote to Robineau to allow things to go on as far as they possibly could. Nothing appeared to him more delightful than to avenge himself of the uncle through the niece; and

he smiled to think that his son should be actually the instrument of that vengeance. To give him leisure to consummate it, the comte prolonged his stay in Paris, promising himself to arrive sufficiently soon at Bigny to enjoy the shame of the victim and the tears of the cursed curate.

During this time he actively carried on the scheme of seduction he had entered upon. When he judged the hour was come, one day when he found himself alone with Madame Barnajon and her daughter,—

“Do you know,” said he, smiling, “the histories of two armies which, about to come to blows, took advantage of a few hours of truce, to visit each other, and reciprocally to do the honours of their camp? This would be somewhat our case, if you would please, after having received me with so much grace and kindness, to come to Bigny and pass the remainder of the fine season. How will this proposition suit you? Paris is burning hot, dusty, and uninhabitable; no one is left in it but men of business. All the aristocracy have taken flight for the woods. Do as they have done; have you not at command, woods, lands, a park, and a château? You, sister, will awaken with delight the remembrances of your infancy; you, my fair and charming niece, will visit our mountains, which will present to you sites and aspects worthy of the pencil of a poetic mind like yours. Think, sister, think, Malvina, what joy your presence will impart to my amiable Roger. The dear boy made the journey expressly to be introduced to you; the fatigue of the route and his delicate health did not allow him to accompany me further. Not having been able to reach you, he will bless you for being kind enough to come to him. He is a youth you will love, sister; you, Malvina, will learn to cherish him as a brother. Besides, it is at least right that my niece should become acquainted with the domains and castle of her ancestors.”

At the words, *castle of her ancestors*, Malvina coloured with pleasure. Madame Barnajon raised a few objections; but the comte was so pressing, and Malvina so earnest in her entreaties, that she at length yielded. It was, however, agreed that at the end of the autumn hostilities should recommence, as if nothing had happened to interrupt them. The Comte des Songères immediately sent his orders to Robineau, and everything was prepared for the reception of the ladies. He had, at first, the idea of changing nothing in the ancient manor; but, on studying the tastes of his niece and his sister, he had perceived that the blood of the Barnajons had passed that way, and that they would not easily accommodate themselves with the poetry of the old

walls. They were of those women who adore ruins, broken arches, and towers dressed in ivy, upon condition of only walking to them on soft carpets, and of finding in them all their accustomed luxuries and elegancies.

One night, on returning from Saint-Sylvain, where he had passed the day, Roger stopped in a state of consternation at the foot of the *perron*. Within two steps of him, in the court, stood a post-chaise with the horses removed, and the windows of the château gleamed brilliantly through the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

PARIS AT BIGNY.

ROGER passed the night in preparing himself for the assaults he had determined not to put off for a single day. On the morrow, then, as soon as he thought he could present himself to his father, whom he had not seen the preceding night, on account of the lateness of the hour, he left his chamber and repaired to the apartment of the comte, with a firm step and a resolute heart. He had lost nothing of his courage and firmness; and yet, when about to enter, he stopped before the door, and there, independently of the anger he should not fail to raise, he grew pale and his blood congealed in his veins at thinking of the stern and icy welcome he was going to meet. He had never appeared before his father without a feeling of painful constraint, approaching to terror. After a few minutes, in which he called Catherine to his aid, ashamed of his weakness, and ready to brave everything, he entered. In the ante-chamber he crossed Robineau, who was leaving his master's apartment; the insulting countenance of this man was an additional spur. He traversed two or three rooms, and arrived, without flinching or hesitating, at that in which the comte was. Whether the conversation he had had with his steward had irritated him, or that he was otherwise preoccupied, the Comte des Songères was walking at a quick pace from one end of the chamber to the other, in a state of visible agitation. At the noise of the opening door, he turned

sharply round, and Roger trembled from head to foot at finding himself once more beneath that look which had held him during twenty years like a sparrow under the eye of a goshawk. He again grew pale, and the moisture stood on his brow; but this feeling of terror was soon replaced by one of surprise, and even stupor, when he saw his father come towards him, with an outstretched hand and a smiling mouth.

"How do you do? how do you do, my son?" said the comte with effusion. And taking the hands of the young man, and drawing him towards him, he embraced him cordially, with the bluntness of a soldier.

At this evidence of affection—the first Roger had ever received from his father,—Roger, of a tender, nervous, and impressionable nature, felt his heart give way and his eyes moisten.

"My father," said he, "this is the first time you ever embraced me!"

The comte only replied by pressing him again to his breast.

"My son," replied the old fox, with a melancholy gravity, "the truest and most profound tendernesses are not always those which make the most display and noise. There are silent spirits to whom frequent demonstrations of affection are repugnant. Before judging me, you must know me. You will one day learn what storms have crossed my passage, and dried up the springs of my heart. You will then also learn how, under that apparent coldness which has made you doubtful of my love, I was only engaged in cares for your happiness. And yet, I must confess, I was ignorant how dear you were to me: absence has taught me."

"My father," said Roger, who asked himself whether he were really awake, and whether this were not a dream, "I regret I was not at the château yesterday to receive you; you forgot to name to me the day of your arrival, and, according to your letter, I could not suppose —"

"Well, well!" cried the Comte des Songères gaily, tapping him familiarly on the shoulder, "we know full well that no one here below can serve at the same time, his king, his mistress, and his father. Well, Roger, why do you blush and look agitated? You are in love; that belongs to your age. Love becomes youth, as roses do the spring."

"So, then, father," asked Roger in a hesitating voice, passing from enchantment to enchantment, "you know all; you know that my heart has given itself away during your absence, and, far from blaming me, far from being angry, as I had feared, you approve of my choice, and smile upon my love."

"How, the devil!" cried the comte; "did you take me for one of those fathers peculiar to comedy, who desire that their sons should preserve their robe of innocence till thirty? It has never been my wish to keep you in confinement. You are young,—youth must be doing. I even confess it would not have been agreeable to me to have, as the heir of my name and titles, a shame-faced Joseph, always ready to make the sacrifice of his cloak to his modesty. I love to see in a young man the fires of the morning of life; I hate nothing so much as those great boobies who make such pretensions to modesty as to fall back upon the worship of the priestesses of Vesta. I not only approve of your love, I applaud it. The little girl is, I hear, charming?"

"She is an angel, father!"

"I am satisfied she is,—it is a general rule; all the women we love are angels. The little girl, besides, belongs to Paradise in more ways than one, for she is, I hear, the niece of the minister of our neighbourhood."

"Yes, father," replied Roger, who, not failing to remark the tone in which the comte spoke of the matter, began to be pained and offended by it—"yes, the girl that I love is niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain."

"Astonishing!" cried M. des Songères, smiling. "A niece of a curé! *Malpeste!* that is pretty well! We shall not soon equal that! Who the devil, on seeing you, would suspect that? You commence better than Don Juan. A niece of a curé!—excuse me a moment!—it is with her that monsieur makes his *début*, is it? Accept my compliments! And now tell me, Roger, may one ask, without indiscretion, how far you have advanced with your Armida of the sacristy?"

"Father, I will inform you," replied Roger, proudly, for he felt the redness of indignation mount to his countenance at these words; "this young girl is as pure as she is lovely."

"So much the worse for you," replied the comte.

"I venerate her as much as I love her."

"In that case, it is so much the worse for her."

"And I am resolved to marry her," added Roger with firmness.

"What did you say?"

"I said, father, that I will marry her," repeated the young man, with a respectful assurance.

Roger entertained no doubt that at these words the thunder would burst over his head; but it happened otherwise. The comte broke into a loud fit of laughter, walking up and down the room, holding his sides in a wild excess of hilarity; whilst his wife,

mute and motionless, stood watching him with a stupefied air,—like a man, who, having armed himself cap-a-pie for a formidable struggle, finds his adversary begin to pelt him with pellets of bread crumb.

"My boy," at length said the comte, giving to his countenance a grave and collected expression, "I acknowledge the honour and candour of your noble mind. I was quite certain my Roger could not play the part of a vulgar seducer. In your ignorance of the world and of life, you must naturally have supposed that marriage is a necessary and forced consequence of love. At twenty, we all reason thus. Because we love and believe ourselves beloved, we talk of disposing of our destinies, as if the question only concerned a single day. Happy age! which reason, the sad daughter of years and experience, envies and regrets while suppressing her feelings."

"Do not deceive yourself, father; all that you can say to me on this subject I have said to myself. My determination is made, my resolve is fixed; and if it be true that you love me, and that you take any interest in my happiness——"

"I shall assist you, I suppose, in consummating the misfortune of your whole life,—that is it, is it not? Much obliged to you; you are mad, Roger!"

"My madness is dear to me, and I shall hold by it."

"For Heaven's sake, let us have done with this childishness! I grant you a fortnight to reflect upon it. If, within a fortnight, you have not recovered yourself,—well!—we will speak of it again. But, from this time to that, I beg you, Roger, permit me to enjoy in peace the pleasure I experience in finding myself once again with you, and accompanied by my sister, in the spot in which I was born, and which I visit, perhaps, for the last time. Your father is not happy, my son; he never was so. He will soon depart, to grow old in a foreign land. Have pity on a poor exile; promote his last happiness; do not disturb the few minutes that remain to him to pass in his native soil, beneath the roof of his ancestors."

At these words, Roger looked earnestly at his father, to ascertain if it could possibly be he that was speaking.

"You weep, my father! you weep!" cried he, with a burst of involuntary and spontaneous tenderness.

"They are the first tears I have shed since the death of your mother; I have long believed the source of such to be dried up and exhausted. But, come! we must have no weakness!" added he, wiping his eyes. "I am strong. I ought to be so; and *although* broken in spirit, I shall depart joyously, if I can,—before

I go, realize my last dream, if it be given to me as a supreme consolation to carry with me the sentiment of your felicity."

Thereupon, having taken Roger affectionately by the arm, he drew him with him into the park, to take a turn, till the proper hour for introducing him to his aunt and cousin.

"Our country is not a vain word," said he, leaning carelessly on the arm of his son; "the influence of our native soil is not a chimera invented by the poets. I should in vain endeavour to defend myself from it. The hatred of the wicked, the fury of fools, base calumnies, have forced me to quit this place; but they have had no power to wean my heart from it. Nature is not responsible for the perversity of mankind. What remembrances spring up beneath my steps! It was here that passed away the early days of your childhood. I have seen your little feet trotting about upon this sward and in these walks. Your mother was alive then. Amiable and dear creature!—too soon ravished from my love! Believe me, my son, it is in vain to create for oneself a new family; nothing will replace the hearth at which we have grown up, or the first woman to whom we have given the sweet name of lover and wife! Roger, I desire that, one of these evenings, you and I should go and kneel together at the tomb of your mother."

Let us endeavour to conceive the stupefaction and confusion of Roger, who thus saw all his plans of battle defeated, all his batteries demolished, and his guns spiked on the spot, without his having burnt a single ounce of powder. He had reckoned upon obstacles to be surmounted, affronts to be undergone, passion and rage to be subdued; therefore, had he armed himself in consequence, and prepared courage and firmness. But how could he have thought of putting himself on his guard against the tenderness, the smiles and tears of that inflexible man, whom he had never before seen either to weep or to smile?

"So, my son," said the comte in a caressing tone, "you fancied I did not love you, did you? That is quite simple. Youth seldom descends to the depths of things; it does not look beyond appearances. You never thought of asking yourself what I must have endured and suffered to have been brought to that point of sombre *ennui* and almost savage melancholy; you never thought of asking yourself what morbid sensibility was perhaps concealed under that cold and rough bark. Roger, I wish you no ill; so far from it, I accuse myself of having neglected your tenderness, of never having shown you any but the painful side of my soul. In your turn, my son, you must pardon me."

"Pardon you, father," replied the young man with deference,

"what can I have to pardon? One must be beloved to have the right to pardon."

"You have acquired that right, my son."

"You have embraced me, father, and I have forgotten everything," said Roger.

"Charming being! Alas! it is on the eve of parting only that our hearts seek each other and begin to mingle."

"It is sufficient for two hearts to have met and been touched once to place it out of the power of time and distance to disunite them. Father," added Roger, who, less affected than astonished, never lost sight, in the midst of these speeches, of the interests of his passion, "God forbid that I should wish to trouble, by my egotistical preoccupations, the content of your mind. It is just that your joys should be considered before mine. Permit me only to reckon upon the promise you have made, to listen to me in a fortnight with serious attention, if not with kindness."

"Roger, you may depend upon me. Depend upon it also that I shall listen to you with all the kindness of a firm mind and a steady reason, which can only have your good as their object."

"I depend upon this, father, and I thank you," replied Roger seriously.

Strong in this assurance, the young Des Songères felt himself free and almost joyous. We must even admit, at the risk of spoiling a little the physiognomy of our hero, that, at bottom, he was not sorry for this adjournment; for, although very much in love with Catherine, and determined upon marrying her, our young friend was not one of those who go straight to their object, like a bullet, clearing obstacles, instead of going round them, and cut through with the sharp blade of their will the gordian knots which destiny presents to them.

They were strolling on, chatting in this manner, when, at the turning of a walk, at the same place where Roger had first met the little maiden, they came unexpectedly face to face with Madame Barnajon and her daughter, who had been walking some time. The comte seized the hand of Roger, and led him towards his sister.

"My son," said he, "embrace your aunt."

Roger embraced his aunt, and then bowed to his cousin.

"Come, come, young people, embrace likewise," said the comte.

Malvina held out her hand to the young man, who took it respectfully, and touched it with his lips.

This ceremony over, when they had exchanged on both sides the customary phrases on such occasions, the Comte des Son-

gères offered his arm to his sister, Roger offered his to his cousin, and the little caravan advanced slowly towards the château, to which the breakfast-bell was summoning them. As the path was too narrow to allow four persons to walk abreast, Madame Barnajon and her brother went first, followed, at a small distance, by Malvina and her cousin.

Roger had, in truth, no reason for loving these two ladies. It was, at most, only a few days since he had any suspicion that he had an aunt and a cousin in the world. Their presence, which he could not explain, must necessarily interrupt his happiness, and be a restraint upon his liberty. And yet, though but moderately delighted at seeing them, the impression he received at first sight did not precisely correspond with the hostility of his anticipations. He had figured to himself something, not of the handsomest or of the most gracious, something which would at once be mortally displeasing to him. He had his motives for judging thus; when we are in love, we readily imagine that, except the beloved being, there is nothing beautiful under the heavens. Whoever has been able to believe, while love was knocking at his heart, that there were here below, after his mistress, other young and handsome women, we may say that Cupid has tapped him on the shoulder, but he has never loved. Roger had an idea that, except Catherine, all women were ugly, and resembled old Martha. Certes, on seeing his cousin, he did not feel the image of the little maiden pale in his breast; only, although he would have preferred her being five hundred leagues from Bigny, over mountains and seas, he was obliged to confess to himself that Mademoiselle Barnajon was of a much less disagreeable aspect than he had imagined.

She was a tall and handsome person, with black eyes and hair, a haughty and somewhat bold look, a complexion brown with colour, slender but magnificently developed. If examined in detail, it would be said that her features had nothing finished or exquisite in them. A delicate pencil would have, perhaps, refused to place upon canvas the sensual harmony of those lines and contours. To speak frankly, there was much nobleness and distinction wanting; but there was something in the whole that was splendid, and that certainly was set off by the brilliancy of health and the freshness of youth. It was evident that life flowed and circulated beneath that golden transparent skin. Her hair, less fine than abundant, strayed along her temples, in spirals of ebony, shaded with blue. The sun of autumn was less warm than the humid lustre in which her eye swam. She was dressed in elegant morning costume, which she wore with as much ease as grace.

A white dress of India muslin enveloped her in its thousand folds; a Smyrna scarf floated from her shoulders. A brodequin of Turkish satin pressed her foot perhaps a little too tightly; her hand, gloved as if for a ball, played negligently with a parasol of grey moire, with a handle encrusted with turquoises.

As to Madame Barnajon, the time when her beauty was the question had long passed away. And yet she exhaled a perfume of aristocracy which it would have been difficult to find in her daughter; she preserved a remains of native dignity which the world of money in which she had lived had not been able entirely to absorb. It could be perceived, as we have said, that the Barnajons had passed that way; but there were still some vestiges of an ancient race visible. It was a parchment that had been rubbed against a bag of crowns; the rubbing had altered the characters, but on looking at it closely, the impression of armorial bearings might still be discovered.

"Do you know, brother," said Madame Barnajon, "you have made an enchanting and delightful spot of the old manor. If it be only on my account you have put yourself to such expense, I certainly must admire and admit both your gallantry and your generosity."

"Sister," replied the comte, laughing, "it being probable that this château may on any day belong to you, by the decree of justice and right of conquest, I thought it my duty to restore it, embellish it, and render it as worthy of you as I could."

"Beware, brother, beware! If you joke, you may chance to bite your fingers. I warn you, that all this luxury of hospitality, which you have displayed for me, instead of relaxing my pretensions, will only serve to raise them. You may be assured that if I disputed ill-looking ruins with you, I shall not be disposed to yield a palace in exquisite order."

"Palace or ruins, I declare that I have no other desire, no other ambition, than to install you here in full sovereignty."

"If so, why are we at law?"

"*Per il piacer e per l'onore.* Litigation is a game full of divers chances, therefore full of excitement; so much for the pleasure. And then it ought not to be said that a Comte des Songères allowed the domains of his ancestors to be taken from him without a blow; that is for the honour."

"What follies! But of all the surprises you have prepared for me, the most agreeable is certainly your son. You spoke to me of a mean, puling boy; I fancy you must have been laughing at me."

"Do you think Roger tolerable, then?"

"Tolerable! say, charming."

"That is my opinion; but it would not have been proper for me to say so."

"That is too modest, and leads to a false conclusion; for I really cannot see that my nephew at all resembles my brother."

"You are very polite! But, all paternal vanity apart, when you will have learnt to love him, you will comprehend that he is my joy and my pride. As you say, he is a charming young man. Mild and proud, tender and affectionate; he is the living portrait of his mother."

"Poor woman! I never knew her; but I have been obliged to hear that you made her die with grief."

"And did you believe it?"

"Why, I thought, if it was not exactly true, it was very probable."

"Many thanks for your opinion! My wife died of consumption, in my arms, and blessing me."

"Yes; I was told at the time that she died unconscious," added Madame Barnajon, quietly.

Let us leave these two brotherly souls to pursue such a pleasant conversation, and turn round to the young people; the one timid, embarrassed, blushing at every word, like a virgin; the other, on the contrary, endowed to the highest degree with the *viril aplomb* and that intrepid assurance that money teaches the vestals of our salons.

"How have you, cousin," said Malvina, "been able to endure alone, and without distractions, for more than three months, a life in such a secluded country? In your place, in less than a week, I should have died of *ennui*. The château is tolerable; but all the country is frightful. I have hitherto seen nothing but mountains, woods, meadows, and heath. Heather broom looks very well at a ball, in one's hair. Are you fond of dancing, cousin?"

"Mademoiselle," replied Roger, "up to the present time, my most brilliant *fêtes* have been passed in solitude. Having seen nothing of the world, I can say nothing about it. All that I can say is, that my tastes do not lead me to seek it."

"That is strange. You do not like the world?"

"I do not know it."

"But do you not wish to know it?"

"No, mademoiselle."

"Why, then, cousin, how *do* you pass your time?"

"What shall I say? I sometimes forget myself for whole

hours, on the banks of the Creuse, looking at the water flowing noiselessly at my feet; and nearly in the same way do I see my days glide away."

"Ah! you are a poet, then?"

"I have neither that good fortune, nor that honour."

"And yet I could have sworn, on seeing you, that you made verses."

"It is a divine language, which I understand, which I love; but, alas! I do not speak it."

"For my part, I adore poetry; poets are my passion. Lamartine, Lamartine! you must allow he is delightful."

"I am only acquainted with a few of M. de Lamartine's verses. I repeat them constantly over and over to myself. I love them as I do the sound of bells, in the evening, in the depth of the woods."

"Ah, yes; 'the sound of bells, in the evening, in the depth of woods!'—by moonlight particularly. I adore moonlight! There is a fine air they have made upon *Le Lac*. I will sing it to you. Do you like music, cousin?"

"Mademoiselle, I come from a country where music is mingled with the air one breathes."

"From Germany—happy country! For my part, I cannot admit it is possible to live without music. I would as soon go without lace or diamonds. Have you heard any of the romances of Loisa Paget? Ah, that is true, you were brought up in Germany. How are bonnets worn at Vienna and Berlin?"

"Why, upon the head, I suppose," replied Roger seriously.

Malvina broke into a loud fit of laughter.

"And tell me, how do people live in the horrible country where we now are? Do you crown fair Rosières here? Have you in the environs anything like a prefecture, where one might, without too much compromising oneself, go and dance, occasionally? Do you dance the *Mazourka*, cousin? Pardon me, I am continually forgetting I am speaking to a savage from the shores of the Oronoko."

With this they arrived at the château. After breakfast, whilst Roger was talking with his aunt, who appeared to take great pleasure in listening to him—

"Well, my young and fair *châtelaine*," asked the comte, drawing his niece into the embrasure of a window, "what do you think of my son?"

"That he is a Mohican, but that we shall civilize him," replied Malvina gaily.

"In a very few months this Mohican will be neither more nor

less than Comte des Songères, for I mean to leave him my title on quitting France. Have you seen our escutcheons? Three *merlettes d'or* upon a *field azure*. Some of our ancestors repose in the Holy Land, for we were amongst the Crusaders. One of us was embraced by Philip Augustus, after the battle of Bovines. Charles VII., when he was only Roi de Bourges, came to visit this château; he slept in the chamber you occupy. Do you see this brilliant? It was given to your maternal grandfather by Queen Marie Antoinette. We are, between ourselves, of as good a house as the king. Your mother, my dear niece, committed a great fault in her *mésalliance*,—an irreparable fault! The canaille may say what they will, the noblesse will always hold the height of the *pavé*. Beneath us there is nothing,—above us there is nothing but God. A comtesse's coronet would look very well at the corner of that pretty handkerchief," added he, in an absent manner, crumpling up with the ends of his fingers the piece of fine cambric, bordered with Valenciennes, which Malvina held in her hand.

"Do you mean, uncle, that Charles VII. slept in the chamber in which I slept last night?"

"Certainly he did. He had in his train Xantrilles and Dunois. I could even show you a piece of the curtain he tore with the spurs of his boots."

"Indeed!"

"Exactly as I tell you."

"And that brilliant comes from Queen Marie Antoinette?"

"I have sworn that it should only be obtained with my life," replied the comte, unfastening from his cravat a little pin, worth at most two or three pistoles, which he stuck upon the *fichu* Malvina wore round her neck.

At this instant, a calèche, quite new, with shining wheels, panels with armorial bearings, as flexible as a reed, slender and light as a canoe, glided softly over the gravel of the court, and stopped at the foot of the *perron*. The early days of autumn were coming on, and they are almost always magnificent in the mountains of the Creuse. The blue of the heavens had already paled; the sun had no longer any but those tempered ardours, which are, after the fires of summer, what a peaceful and serene love is after the mad fervours of youth. The gossamers floated in the air; the chrysanthemum was about to bloom; the breezes, in passing over the tops of the trees, began to draw more sonorous sounds from them. Madame Barnajon and her daughter got into the carriage, in which the comte and his son took their places opposite to them, and they set off, at the magnificent atax

of the two handsome dappled-greys, to visit the environs. Whatever Malvina might say, the country was enchanting. It is very true, notwithstanding, that nothing was to be seen but hills covered with heath and foxglove, woods without end, steep rocks, and the river in the distance—like a silver ribbon, at the bottom of the valley. To please Mademoiselle Barnajon, this only wanted to be painted by Ciceri upon an opera-scene.

They chatted—in fact, what can people do in a *calèche* if they do not chat? The comte conversed with his sister, Malvina with her cousin. Although in love, Roger did not prove himself to be too disagreeable. He had seen Catherine only the evening before, and purposed seeing her the next day. Besides, he had just learnt that the stay of his aunt and cousin would not be prolonged beyond the autumn. He knew that at the same time his father would return to Germany, and that he, Roger, would then remain master of the field. In short, the affection the comte had displayed for him, the hope of issuing victoriously from the struggle he was engaged in, the satisfaction of having planted his standard in the breach, all concurred to make him less peevish and unbearable than might have been expected. He ended even, without finding the least charm in it, by lending himself, with a tolerably good grace, to the coquetry of his cousin, who spoke of everything, right or wrong, with that imperturbable *aplomb* which we have already witnessed.

On their return to the château, after a dinner royally served, they repaired to the saloon, illumined as if for a fête. The evenings began to be fresh; a wood-fire sparkled on the hearth; Malvina took her seat at the piano. She played as everybody else does. She, in the first place, executed some melodies by Schubart; then sang, without hesitation, some grand airs from *Robert-le-Diable*, the *Juive*, and the *Favorite*, mixed with romances and barcaroles. She sang without taste; but she had one of those brilliant voices which generally pass for fine ones. The comte, who was in raptures whilst listening to her, wriggling about in his fauteuil with admiration, declared she played as well as Listz, and that Catalani, Pasta and Malibran would be but scholars beside her. Roger could not help admitting that his cousin was very agreeable.

In short, this day, which he had contemplated the preceding night with terror, had proved less terrible and less slow in ending than he had figured to himself it would at its beginning. Upon the stroke of ten, they took tea gaily enough; then the comte embraced his son, Roger embraced his aunt, Malvina gave her hand to the young vicomte to kiss; and this being done, each

retired to their chamber. All fell fast asleep, though differently rocked,—the comte swearing he would prevail over his sister and his son; Madame Barnajon promising equally to turn out her brother; Roger saying that he would marry Catherine; Malvina thinking that Charles VII. had slept in her chamber, and that her cousin would in two months be Comte des Songères. Roger beheld in his dream the little fairy smiling upon him; and Malvina, three merlettes, which, detaching themselves from the ground of azure, flew and perched upon her shoulders, billing at her lips.

The next day was Sunday. For three months, Roger had never failed passing his Sunday at the cure. On that day, Catherine expected him to a certainty, and worthy Martha had economized the whole week in order to offer him some little delicacy, prepared the night before. They were accustomed, in their humble way, to give him an extraordinary welcome; it was the only day on which wine was drunk at the table of François Paty. Roger arrived at mass-time, and did not return to Bigny till after having dined at the presbytery. He would not have missed one of those charming engagements for anything in the world.

He arose early, declaring to himself, that on that day he had neither father, aunt, nor cousin; and that, if there were at Bigny twenty aunts like Madame Barnajon and twenty cousins like Mademoiselle Malvina, he would go not the less to Saint-Sylvain. He would have left the king himself to hasten where his heart called him.

As he was quietly leaving the château to get his horse, he was not a little surprised to find the calèche, with the horses harnessed, standing before the grand door, and his father in the court, walking about with Master Robineau. The comte came towards him, and embraced him with more warmth than even the day before.

"Roger," said he, "I forgot to inform you that these ladies are accustomed to attend mass every Sunday, and that they depend upon you to conduct them to Saint-Sylvain's. My principles, pretty well settled in matters of religion, not permitting me to accompany them, I thought you would not refuse to take my place on this occasion, so much the more from learning that you are become very pious, and attentive to Divine service."

At these words Roger grew red, then pale, and was greatly agitated.

"But, father,——"

"You cannot disoblige me! Remember, my young friend, that your aunt is a Des Songères, and that the Des Songères never joke upon the chapter of the proper respect due to them."

remember, also, that if she were not my sister, you would still have the duties of hospitality to perform."

"Yes—but, father, I have disposed of my day; and, truly, to-day I do not belong to myself."

"Are you incapable of sacrificing a little youthful fancy to me, which you will to-morrow be at liberty to satisfy? I do not command you,—I beg you."

"Stop, father," cried Roger, making a violent effort to recover himself; "I am penetrated to the bottom of my soul with the tenderness you have shown me since your return. I am more affected by it than I can express. It appears that a new life has opened upon me since yesterday; but yet—permit me,—suffer me——"

Here Roger was stopped short by the dazzling apparition of Madame Barnajon and her daughter,—both *en grande toilette*, and dressed nearly, particularly Malvina, as if going to the Théâtre Italien.

Piety, as may well be supposed, had very little to do in this affair. Madame Barnajon was not sorry to visit the little church in which she remembered to have kneeled when a child; and Malvina was delighted at the idea of going to hear mass in a little village church, and placing herself before the congregation, as a *châtelaine*, upon the seignorial form.

Roger defended himself in vain. The mother took him by one arm, the daughter by the other; they dragged him into the carriage, the comte shut the door, and the horses set off at speed.

CHAPTER XII.

SUNDAYS FOLLOW EACH OTHER, BUT ARE NOT AT ALL ALIKE.

On that same day, awake long before the *Angelus*, our little friend had risen early, but no longer, as formerly, fresh and rosy as the dawn itself, and immediately filling the house with the clear melody of her cheerful voice. The roses of health had paled upon her cheeks, gaiety no longer sang in her young bosom. It is thus that at the approach of a storm, though the sky be pure

and serene, flowers hang their heads upon their stalks, and birds become silent beneath the foliage. For more than a week, sleeplessness had watched over her pillow; the thought that she was concealing her situation from her uncle weighed upon her mind like remorse. And yet, although sad, restless, and agitated, she smiled sweetly at the thought of seeing Roger, and living near him during a whole day. She dressed herself slowly, arranged her beautiful brown hair with care; then, dressed in her best attire, she left her chamber and went into the garden, to take her seat upon the mossy bank, where Roger had pledged his faith to her. In the mean time, the good curé was reading his breviary under the chestnut-trees on the terrace, whilst Martha, leaning over her stove, was giving the last touch to the confection of a dish of cream, at which she hoped the young vicomte would lick his lips. At the first bell for mass, Catherine arose from her seat and repaired to the church, not without casting a long and anxious look, as she crossed the place, down the road by which she expected Roger. She met Claude under the porch; but the worthy youth, instead of stopping to speak to her as formerly, stood on one side silently, to allow her to pass. Catherine, on her part, had not the courage to say anything to him, and passed timidly on, as if she felt herself culpable. Amidst the preoccupations which absorbed her, she could not help referring to the times when they used to go together, he and she, to gather from the fields and hedges the wild flowers with which they, every Sunday, decked the steps of the altar, and perhaps she felt some confused little regret for those days of fraternity, peace and innocence. After she had prepared everything for the celebration of the holy mass, she went to her accustomed place, where the poor of the commune were not long in coming to kneel around her. Soon after the crowd from without flowed silently and seriously into the rustic temple: Claude and Father Noirel took their posts in front of the pulpit; little Jean rang his bell; all knees were bent, all brows were reverently bowed; divine service began.

Catherine prayed with fervour; and yet this fervour did not prevent the little maiden from frequently turning a furtive glance towards the seignorial bench. The pious girl was angry with herself for these distractions; but whatever efforts she made to conquer herself, like the heliotrope towards the sun, like the needle to the pole, her heart and her eyes strayed, in spite of her, towards the spot where they thought to find Roger. More than an hour had passed away, the divine mystery approached its end, and no Roger appeared: the seignorial bench was empty. Catherine

rine was beginning to be very uneasy, when she felt some one pull her dress, and Paquerette whispered,—

“Mademoiselle! mademoiselle! look at the fine ladies with the handsome monsieur!”

At these words, having raised her eyes from her book, the little maiden perceived Roger standing close to Malvina, who was throwing a bold and curious glance over the auditory. Almost at the same instant Claude left his seat, and turning towards Catherine,—

“For the poor of the parish!” cried he, in his clearest voice.

Pale, mute, motionless, with her eyes riveted upon Mademoiselle Barnajon, whose dress and beauty, without veil, glowed in the sun, which fell directly upon her head, Catherine remained deaf to this appeal.

“For the poor of the parish!” repeated Claude, in his most formidable tone, very far from suspecting what was passing in the heart of the little fairy.

At this detonation, which shook the windows of the church, Catherine started as if she had received an electric shock. She endeavoured to rise, but her legs sunk beneath her, and she fell back upon her seat. If she had been able to see with what a sad and sweet look Roger was observing her, perhaps she would have shown less agitation and more confidence; but she had no eyes except for the young and beautiful stranger, who attracted the attention of the whole congregation, somewhat disturbed by the appearance of these ladies.

“Oh, how fine they are! Dear Lord, how fine they are! particularly the young one!” said Paquerette, who had great difficulty in restraining her tongue. “I met them yesterday, riding in a carriage with the handsome monsieur, and another old one, who was not handsome at all. Oh! you should have heard them and seen them, all four laughing and talking, the young with the young, the old with the old! And such beautiful horses! and such a beautiful carriage! Only think, mademoiselle!”

“Hold your tongue, Paquerette, and say your prayers!” murmured Catherine, paler than her uncle’s alb, colder than the slab upon which reposed her feet.

“For the poor of the parish!” repeated Claude, without being discouraged, making the church resound again.

“Mademoiselle,” resumed Paquerette, “Monsieur Claude is calling you to collect for the poor. I don’t care what they say,” added she; “he has the finest voice in the country!”

With an extraordinary effort, Catherine rose, and, her collect-

ing-purse in hand, advanced in the steps of the younger Noirel, who cleared the way for her through the ranks of the faithful. She was so pale and so cast down, that the people were alarmed at seeing her. "You are not well! what is the matter, darling?" said the matrons of the village. "What ails the little maiden?" asked the peasants of each other. Claude, who walked before her, was the only person who perceived nothing. To all the questions put to her, to all the evidences of kindness which she met with on her passage, the niece of François Paty endeavoured to smile and keep a good countenance; but when she arrived near the bench upon which Roger sat, she trembled so violently, that the purse was near falling from her fingers. Madame Barnajon and her daughter ostentatiously deposited their offerings in it. To regain her seat, Catherine was obliged to lean upon the arm of Claude, who now remarked her emotion, and immediately guessed all that was passing within her, for he had suffered from the same complaint, his heart had bled with the same wound, and, strange to say! it was on that self-same bench where Roger had appeared so fatally to him, as may be remembered, that Malvina had no less fatally appeared to the little fairy. An ordinary mind would have thought itself avenged, and would not have failed to admire the designs of Providence. But under that uncouth exterior, the brave Claude, as the pastor had said, was gold in the bar, and not in a morsel of coarse wool. His soul was much better made than his nose, and on seeing Catherine suffer so greatly, it appeared as if he himself were struck a second time.

"Cheer up! cheer up!" said he, as he led her to her place; "the golden pheasant does not sing like the linnet of our woods; the tulip of the garden has not the grace of the daisy of our meadows."

As mass was over, he remained standing humbly behind her, waiting till she had finished her prayers, to accompany her, and support her, if necessary, to the presbytery. After Madame Barnajon and Malvina had retired, escorted by Roger, leaving behind them streams of perfume, they went out from the church together, and arrived under the porch soon enough to see the caleche carrying away the two strangers and the young vicomte through the astonished crowd, which opened on all sides to let it pass, at a rapid pace. Motionless with stupor, Catherine followed them for some time with her eyes; then, when they had disappeared at the turning of the road in a cloud of dust raised by the wheels of their carriage, she quitted the arm of Claude suddenly, and, seizing the hand of Paquerette, who was near her, convulsively, she dragged her into her chamber.

"Now speak! speak!" cried Catherine, in an agitated voice. Did you say you met these two ladies, yesterday, in a carriage with M. Roger?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, and with an old gentleman. I was hidden behind a hedge, and I saw them as plainly as I see you,—both dressed out like princesses. Jewels, feathers, laces! such as cannot be fancied! And each of them held in her hand a little umbrella, no larger than a toad's-stool, which they held, as they talked, over their heads. I kept up with the horses a long way, by running beside the hedges. Good Lord! what a beautiful carriage! what beautiful horses! and those fine ladies, and the handsome monsieur! There was laughing! there was talking! there was fluttering! and when the wind blew their scarfs and their veils towards me, it brought me such sweet smells, that I did all I could to catch them; and when I did breathe them, I believed myself in an apothecary's shop. I followed them ever such a way, and I said to myself, 'Good! to-morrow is Sunday, and I will tell all this to Mademoiselle Catherine after mass; it will amuse her.'"

"And, do you know—has any one told you who those ladies are, whence they came,—in short, what brings them into this country?"

"They say she is a queen, who, having quarrelled with her subjects, wants to buy the Château de Bigny, to retire there with her daughter. That explains the turning the house out of doors they have had yonder lately."

"Where? where do you mean by yonder?" asked Catherine, who felt her agitation increase at every word Paquerette uttered.

"At Bigny, mademoiselle; at M. Roger's château."

"At Bigny! what has been lately done at Bigny?"

"How, mademoiselle! don't you know what has been going on at Bigny lately? For the last fortnight, nothing else has been talked of in the country. Last week, Father Radigois came to sup with my master, and the whole evening they talked of nothing else,—except, save your presence, one of my pigs, which had got drowned the night before, in the river, and got me a good whipping! And when I think that there are little girls whom their mothers rock to sleep every evening on their knees, who sleep every night in good warm beds, and who eat white bread every day,—"

"You should rather think, Paquerette, that there are upon the earth poor little unfortunate creatures, much more to be pitied than you."

"Poor, dear souls! then they don't know you, mademoiselle,"

replied Paquerette, kissing the hand of the little fairy with love and respect.

"Believe me, my child," added Catherine in a melancholy tone, "there are griefs much worse to be endured than yours, and which you have no suspicion of. Continue to love God above all things, that He may preserve you from such during all your life."

"Yes, mademoiselle, and I will pray, night and morning, that He may also keep them from the little maiden."

"Do, my child," replied Catherine, devouring her tears; "and may your prayers reach Him! But you have not told me what was going on at the Château de Bigny."

"Why this, mademoiselle. For some time past, I heard, right and left, that from the preparations going on, it was believed the king was coming to live there with his family. One day, as I was driving my animals that way, I took it into my head to poke my nose through the bars of the great gates, and I saw that the château, which used to be quite black two months before, had become quite white, like monsieur the vicar, when he has put his surplice over his cassock. I said to myself, 'Good! they have not deceived me; this is something new!' I had a great mind to go in, but was afraid of having the dogs set at me by M. Robineau; but I saw in one of the walks of the park, little Cadet, dressed like a gentleman, with cloth gaiters on his legs, and a gold band round his hat. You know, mademoiselle, that it is only three weeks ago that little Cadet had the same job at Bigny that I have at La Hachère, so that it may be said, saving your presence, that we have kept pigs together. 'Hilloa!' said I, 'Cadet, what, have you had a legacy left you, that you go about dressed like a bourgeois?' He wanted, at first, to show off some grand airs; but I set to work with him, and came over him so, that at last he offered to show me everything, declaring that M. Robineau was gone to the city, M. Roger was in the fields, and that, for a quarter of an hour, he, Cadet, was master of the house. You may suppose I did not want asking twice. I left my beasts at the gate, begging them to remain quiet, and followed Cadet gently: he telling me, as we walked along, that he had become a *tiger*, and that, for the time to come, he should only keep pigs in a carriage. 'Tiger!' said I.—'Or *groom*, if you like that better,' said he.—'Oh! its all one to me,' said I; and we came to the bottom of the great stone steps.—'Wipe your feet,' said Cadet to me, 'and fancy you are going to enter the castle of the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood.' I rubbed my feet in the sand of the court, Cadet opened the door, and I went in. But, mademoiselle," added Paquerette, interrupting herself, "it is im-

possible that the handsome monsieur, who comes to the cure so often, has not told you all that is left for me to say?"

"Go on, notwithstanding," said Catherine, with a slight movement of impatience.

"And I entered," resumed Paquerette.

"Only try to be brief."

"Brief?" asked the girl.

"Yes; say many things in fewer words."

"Yes, mademoiselle," said Paquerette, a little confused.

"Go on, then, I am listening to you."

"I don't know where I was."

"You were going in."

"Good! Well, then, at first it seemed to me as if I was sinking up to my knees in something soft and thick. These were carpets, so beautiful and fresh, that the flowers looked real, and I could almost have stooped to gather them. All the floors were covered with them; they were laid up the stairs, and even in the corridors. 'Cadet,' said I, 'I should not like to walk upon them.'—'Bah, bah! do as I do,' said Cadet,—and he fell a-dancing like a goat, at the risk of spoiling all those pretty flowers upon their stalks. He led me from chamber to chamber, and, wherever I went, it shone, it glittered, it blazed, so that I stood till my eyes were dazzled. Cadet laughed at my wonder; and to make me more bold, I believe, rather than to humble me, he stretched himself like a calf in the fauteuils, or rolled about like a cat upon silks and velvets. In the saloon, he opened a kind of buffet, and amused himself with tapping with all his strength upon some little pieces of white horn, which began to sing of themselves, so that, without thinking of it, I began to jig and dance a rigodon. If M. Robineau had come in just then!—it makes one's hair stand on end to think of it! 'Cadet,' at length said I, 'it is, then, true, as they say in the country, that the royal family is coming to live at the château?'—'That does not concern me,' said Cadet, whirling about; 'go and ask the steward,—only he and God know anything about it; all I know is, that I am a groom, and that since I have become a groom, or tiger, which you like, I do nothing but drink, eat, and sleep—sleep, eat, and drink.'—'That is a comfortable place, Cadet,' said I; 'they must, however, expect some great personages here, for it was not for your muzzle, I should guess, that these carpets were laid down and the ceilings gilded. Tell us what you know, Cadet.'—'I am a groom,' replied Cadet, placing himself upon a cushion, with his head down and his feet in the air.—'Nonsense!' said I, 'you don't mean to tell me that a man of your importance is ignorant of what is going on in the

house. Come, tell me what you know, Cadet; please to remember, if you wish that I should forget it, that you have not been always a tiger, my lamb,—and that three weeks ago, at the most,——’—‘Well, then,’ said Cadet, stooping to my ear, in a mysterious manner, ‘between ourselves, see you, I think that it concerns a marriage——’”

“A marriage!” exclaimed Catherine, turning as pale as death.

“Yes, mademoiselle; a marriage between M. Roger and the daughter—Dame!” added she, hesitating, “I only repeat to you what Cadet said.”

Paquerette was but a child; but it is remarkable that little girls are women in the cradle, and that they have, at from eight to ten years of age, instincts and intentions which men do not always have at from twenty-five to thirty. This girl became vaguely aware that she had uttered something very foolish; she threw her arms round Catherine’s neck, and smothered her with tears and kisses.

“Never mind! never mind!” cried she; “Cadet is but a good-for-nothing, who talks of more than he knows; if there were a marriage in the case, I know all about that longer than he does. I know better than he what little feet will walk on those pretty carpets.”

“Go,” said Catherine mildly—“go and play with the children of the village. You have but one day’s liberty in the week, and it is not just that you should pass it in weeping. Besides, why do you cry? I am sure I cannot tell. Go, dear, and do not forget, as you pass, to pay your respects to my uncle; tell Martha I am indisposed, and request to be left alone in quiet.”

When once by herself, she buried her head in her hands, and the sobs which had been stifling her burst forth at liberty. What was going on? What was about to pass? What storm was gathering over her head? What abyss was forming beneath her feet? Without yet comprehending any of the tumultuous feelings of her soul, without asking herself whence came the thunder-bolt which was about to crush her, she felt a stormy atmosphere all around her, and in her heart a dull, silent dread. “Ah! poor Claude!” cried she suddenly, “how he has suffered! how he must suffer!”

Scarcely had she uttered these words, when the door opened softly, and Claude glided into the chamber.

“Begone!” cried the unfortunate girl, with an expression of despair; “I understand you, cruel wretch; you come to feast upon my tears and grief.”

“Pardon me, Catherine! I did promise not to come till you

called upon me. But here is something I have found in my purse, and thinking it might contain something good—would do you good,—I hastened to bring it to you.”

“Give it me! give it me!” said Catherine.

And unfolding with her little fingers a scrap of paper, which fell a piece of gold, she read with an eager glance: lines traced with a pencil by Roger,—a few words only, but breathed confidence and love.

“I love you. How beautiful you are, kneeling and praying among your poor! Pray for our happiness! You turned when you perceived me,—are you not well? You are beautiful and nothing is beautiful but you. My father is returned, my aunt and cousin, whom you saw beside me. He knew everything, and listened to me without anger. I will tell you all at our first interview,—to-morrow, to a certainty,—to-day, possible. If I do not succeed in escaping, instead of being angry with me, pity me! You are pale, you are ill, what is the matter? But you are beautiful! and how I love you!”

“Thanks, Claude! thanks!” cried Catherine, holding out her hand to him.

“Well, now, that is right!” said the good Claude, in a tone of satisfied resignation.

And that said, he returned as quietly as he had entered; whilst, already forgetful of the whole world, and smiling through his tears, like an April morning, sunshine and rain mingled, Catherine reperused the letter, quenching her thirst with long draughts, like a doe escaped from the hunters, at the source of a spring.

Now, while all these little scenes were passing at Saint-Sylvain, Roger, gloomy, angry, dissatisfied with himself, returned to Bigny in forced company with the Barnajon ladies. He had made an effort to escape, after coming out from mass, even if only for an instant, to go and shake hands with the good curé, bid good-day to old Martha, and reassure Catherine, whose uneasy and anxious appearance he could not help noticing. But the compact and curious crowd pressed round the carriage; Madame Barnajon was in haste to escape from this rustic admiration, and at the desire of his aunt, whose high airs and manners did not fail to impose upon him, Roger was obliged to go as he had come,—that is to say, very much against his will. So, face to face with his cousin, against whom, without inquiring of himself why, he nourished a secret irritation, the young vicomte remained silent, grave, *ennuyé*, almost pouting. Madame Barnajon looked about her; Malvina alone kept up the conversation.

“Well!” said she, “it is less amusing and gay than I expected.

It is decidedly not worth the trouble of coming after. It is frightful, that old church! and all those peasants are frightful. And the village, what a den! what a hole! The grass grows in it as if in a field, and fowls are scratching about in the streets. I must, however, allow that the curé of Saint-Sylvain has a fine head. Do you know him, cousin? He must be a good kind of old man that."

"He is a holy man, mademoiselle; worthy of all respect and all veneration."

"Yes," resumed Malvina, "he pleased me; he is patriarchal. I regret that he officiates too slowly,—but that fault is owing to his age. And that tall booby, who sang at the desk, do you know him, cousin?"

"He is a very worthy young man," said Roger.

"What is his name?"

"M. Claude."

"A very genteel-looking young man, that M. Claude: I do not know which is to be most admired, his nose or his voice. And that little girl, who went about begging for the poor, do you know her, cousin?"

Roger made no reply.

"She is a nice-looking little girl, that. Although badly dressed, and without taste, she was certainly the best thing in the church. I should advise her, though, to purchase, with the produce of her begging, a sash, a fichu, and a better dress. Do you know her, cousin?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, and am honoured in doing so. She is a noble creature, as pious as beautiful, as modest as she is charming. The poor bless her; she is the tutelary angel of the country; and though meanly-dressed, and, as you say, without taste, there is not a more amiable creature on the earth."

"Do you speak seriously?"

"Quite seriously, cousin."

Malvina bit her lips, and held her tongue.

The remainder of the ride was performed almost silently. Malvina, from time to time, addressed a question to her cousin, but the latter replied in such a dry, short manner, that Mademoiselle Barnajon, tired of her abortive attempts, thought proper not to utter another word. On their return to the château, they went directly to the *salle-à-manger*; for, although they had taken some refreshment in the seat of the carriage, their appetites cried aloud,—if we may except Roger, who maintained during all the repast the demeanour he had worn in the calèche—taciturn, preoccupied, not mixing in the conversation, and scarcely

swallowing a mouthful of what was handed to him. He was very anxious about the trouble in which he had left Catherine, and regretted a day lost for happiness; he was likewise angry with himself for not having had the courage to remain at Saint-Sylvain, and for having fled away in such a cowardly manner; in short, without rendering to himself an account of what was passing in his mind, he had suffered in his pride and in his love from the humble position of his affianced wife, in the presence of his aunt and cousin: such was the unavowed but real cause of the secret irritation he had felt for some hours, against Madame Barnajon still less than against his cousin. As for Malvina, piqued to the quick by the manner in which Roger had expressed himself when speaking of the pretty collector, she had conceived a vague sentiment of spite and jealousy against her. When appetites began to be appeased, tongues were released, and conversation commenced.

"Well, uncle, your church of Saint-Sylvain is a pretty church! I would not have it for a barn. God ought to be very much flattered, in heaven, to see he has such habitations on earth. And the audience! only think of that! It was fortunate that before I set out this morning, I emptied a whole vial of essence into my handkerchief. And your seignorial bench! as seignorial as you please; only I would advise you to have some cushions taken to it. What do you say, mamma, when we compare with this the musical masses of Saint-Roch, and the religious ceremonies of Notre Dame de Lorette?"

"We must not forget," replied Madame Barnajon, "that we are in the Marchois country, at more than a hundred leagues from Paris."

"She really is charming!" added the Comte des Songères, smiling. "It is absolutely, my amiable niece, as if you expected to find the opera at Bourgneuf, and the Bouffes at Aubusson."

"Mademoiselle," said Roger, in his turn, "permit me in this to be not entirely of your opinion. I know nothing, for my part, more contrary to the true spirit of religion than those religious solemnities which change the houses of the Lord into theatres, and where the seats and the benches are transformed into balcony stalls and gallery boxes. I know neither Saint-Roch nor Notre Dame de Lorette; but I have visited cathedrals, wonders of art, masterpieces of faith, enriched, for the most part, with the pictures of Albert Durer, Rubens, and Vandyke; and yet is none of these have I been more sensible to the presence of God than between the naked walls and beneath the open roof of that poor church of which you have spoken so disparagingly."

"That arises, no doubt, from your having your private reasons for judging so, cousin," replied Malvina tartly.

"Bravo! well parried!" cried the comte. "The grace of an angel, the wit of a demon."

At these words the young man blushed, and was evidently confused.

"For me, who have not the same motives as you," resumed Mademoiselle Barnajon, encouraged by the approbation of her uncle, "I declare frankly, that I did not for a single instant feel the presence of God in that too primitive temple. But you yourself, cousin, appeared to me less preoccupied with the presence of the Deity than with that——"

"Mademoiselle, I pray——" said Roger, turning towards his cousin with a look at once severe and supplicating.

"The fact is, she is pretty—that little girl yonder," continued Malvina pitilessly. "Do you know her, uncle? Is she not passable, mamma? No figure, no fashion, no style; but still she is, in the midst of that pious assembly of rustics and labourers, we might say, a lily sprung up in a stable."

"Certainly, certainly," added Madame Barnajon; "the girl is by no means ill-looking."

"Well, I assert, mamma, that she is very good-looking," resumed Malvina; "and that dressed with a little care, she would become something very enticing and quite new."

Here Roger made the movement of a wild beast, ready to spring upon his prey; his lips were white, and his blue eyes, becoming black, flashed upon Malvina like the lightning of the tempest.

"Of whom are you speaking, niece?" asked the Comte des Songères carelessly; "for since I left this country, twenty years ago, many lilies must have passed away that I never knew."

"What, uncle!" cried Malvina, "do you not know the pearl of Saint-Sylvain—the tutelar angel of this hamlet and these plains?—an adorable creature, who cannot take a step without awakening around her a concert of benedictions! As pious as beautiful, as modest as charming; so modest, that she conceals her wings under her fichu, for fear of humbling her neighbour. The poor only speak of her with tears, and heaven envies earth the possession of her. For fuller information, address yourself to my cousin, who takes great honour to himself for knowing her, and sees nothing in this lower world either more amiable or more enchanting."

"*Eh, pardieu!*" cried the comte, "this can be no other than the niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain; it is Roger's dulcinea."

"Ah, indeed!" said Madame Barnajon.

"Father!" exclaimed Roger, in a tone as much of anger as shame.

"You don't say so!" cried Malvina. "Well now, cousin, she is really pretty. I compliment you on your taste."

"Ay, but," resumed the comte, in a tone half serious, half jeering, "these are amours that are no joke; not, I beg to warn you, one of those little love affairs of which a season witnesses the birth and the death. We have nothing to do here with meteoric love. We have transformed the Creuse into the river *Tendre*, and Saint-Sylvain into the village of *Petits Soins*; but for the sentiment, we have recourse to all the lovers untitled of the Astræa, the Cyrus, and the Polexandre. It is a high-flown passion, and may be said to be carried to the extreme."

"Ah, indeed!" repeated Madame Barnajon.

"You are laughing, uncle, are you not?"

"No, by my faith, I am not laughing," cried the Comte des Songères; and the proof is, that Roger talks of nothing less than marrying his Clelia, his Mandane, his Corysandre."

Upon this the mother and daughter broke into a loud laugh, in which the comte vociferously joined; whilst Roger, pale, silent, and violently angry, asked himself, while looking at them, if it would not be God's justice to strangle them all three?

"What! truly, nephew?"

"What! truly, cousin?"

"Yes, truly and seriously," said Roger, rising from table, with an air of cold dignity.

"What, you will marry that little girl?"

"I wish to marry her, and I will marry her; and this noble creature is worthy of all respect, and also of all love! I am astonished," added he with firmness, "that the chosen wife of my heart, and who will bear my name, does not meet with more respect here."

At these words, pronounced in a tone that admitted of no reply, he left the room hastily, went straight to the stables, and in a few minutes was seen passing at a gallop, through the trees of the park, towards the great gates.

Whilst Malvina, with a more pensive and reflective look than was customary with her, allowed her fingers to run at hazard over the keys of the piano, Madame Barnajon took her brother's arm, and both went to walk round the château. The day had been hot. Faint flashes of lightning, indicative of heat, whitened the horizon; the wind, which blew from the south, mingled its warm puffs with the fresh breath of an autumnal evening. The

comte, while walking, had no longer the active step he had lately exhibited; he appeared low-spirited to such a degree that his sister could not help remarking it.

"Sad, brother? What annoys you now, what oppresses you? Perhaps you are thinking that before long the proprietorship of this estate will have passed from your hands to mine. If it be that which preoccupies you so much, and makes you so gloomy, permit me to observe, that it is not over sensible to allow yourself to grieve for such a trifle. We have no partialities but for the land we dwell in. What do you want with this estate, or this château, in which you have not lived for the last twenty years, and which you propose to quit for ever? The revenues are not so considerable that you cannot lose them without changing anything in your style of living."

"Sister," replied the old fox, "you talk of this quite at your ease; do you know that, in addition to this country being very much ameliorated, Bigny has more than tripled its value? thanks to the intelligent administration of honest M. Robineau. Do you know that, for ten years past, the revenues have been entirely employed in manuring it and fattening it like a Maine pullet? Do you know that, without mentioning the embellishments of the château, which make a princely residence of it, this domain, which at the death of my father, returned, one year with another, two thousand crowns, produces now clear twenty thousand livres?"

"Ay, indeed! twenty thousand livres?"

"M. Robineau's accounts prove it; when you please, you can examine them."

"Twenty thousand livres! That M. Robineau is a charming man! I should never have suspected it, if you had not told me so. Well, now, but look, brother. Resume your spirits. Twenty thousand livres a year, that is something. But, thank God! you are rich, and it is well known you have married to millions in yonder country. It appears to me that, instead of afflicting yourself as you do, you ought to rejoice that this château, park, and lands will not go out of the family, and will only pass from brother to sister. What can be more touching? I am quite excited with barely thinking of it."

"Alas! you are far out of your reckoning," cried the cunning gossip. "I am sad, it is true; but it is because this château, park, and lands will never belong to you, sister."

"Well, if it is for no other account than that," cried Madame Barnajon, laughing, "I can affirm that you alarm yourself without cause."

"Would to God I did!" groaned the comte.

"Place confidence in justice," added Madame Barnajon gaily.

"Pray, sister," said the comte, with a gravity and tone almost solemn, "let me beseech you to cease this ill-timed tridling. I am in pain for the illusions in which I see you; I deem it consistent with my duty and loyalty, to delay no longer enlightening you with regard to our reciprocal position. I am about to open my heart to you; be kind enough to listen to me with attention."

They both sat down upon a circular bench at the foot of a larch, and whilst Madame Barnajon traced circles in the sand with the handle of her parasol, the comte, after collecting his thoughts in a few moments of silence, resumed, as follows:—

"I have never deceived myself, sister, with respect to the spirit in which you commenced proceedings against me. I at once perceived that you were not actuated by the suggestions of mean interests, but by those of a legitimate pride. I was also, even before yourself, in the secret of your humiliations, and saw clearly that you only disputed with me the seat of our common ancestors, in order to restate yourself in your own eyes, and to efface from the eyes of the world the stain of a *mésalliance*. However that might be, I defended my property. I will not, at the present moment, enter into the discussion whether it was my right or not; you cannot deny that it was certainly my duty. I suffered not the less cruelly from our divisions, for you cannot help acknowledging that I have always tenderly loved you."

"Certainly," replied Madame Barnajon; "only observing that you have always evinced the most delicate reserve and exquisite discretion in your tenderness."

"Please to remember that I opposed, by every means in my power, your marriage with M. Barnajon."

"Was it not something like two hundred thousand livres that you forgot to repay him, when you left France?"

"Perhaps it might; I had just lost my wife, and could not have the heart to attend to money matters. To return to our dissensions. Things had been in this state for a long time, the lawsuit was going on, and our lawyers, otherwise very honest men, were making their harvests in our meadows and furrows, when I thought of a plan which would, at one stroke, put an end to our difficulties and satisfy your ambition, bring together our broken ties, and unite them closely for ever."

"You interest me exceedingly," said Madame Barnajon, continuing to trace fantastical geometrical figures in the sand.

"You had a charming daughter, a model of grace and beauty,

the exact image of what her mother was at twenty. On my side, I had a son, of a noble mind, a tender heart, a virgin soul, and a chivalric character. It appeared to me that these two amiable young people were born expressly to bring us together again, and reunite us; I looked upon them as two angels, which took you and me by the hand and drew us gently towards each other. I did not hesitate; I set out for France, bringing Roger with me. If you knew what charming projects I indulged in during the journey! what a pretty *dénouement* I dreamt of for our little comedy, of which I had already laid out the scenes and prepared all the properties! No artist ever brooded over his work with more love. I left Roger at the château, and went on to Paris alone. By the help of a few innocent manœuvres, which affection rendered easy, I succeeded in alluring you to the château. Malvina and Roger were to meet, and to fall in love. Now, sister, you can easily guess the rest. I was willing to install you all three in the domains of my ancestors, giving up my title to Roger. Malvina would be Comtesse des Songères, and I should retake the route to exile, after having enjoyed for a short time the spectacle of your felicity and the picture of your mutual tenderesses."

"All this appears to be very well conceived, and might be very amusing on the stage; but I don't yet perceive what you are driving at, brother," replied Madame Barnajon quietly.

"What! sister," cried the comte, "do you not see that all my plans are completely destroyed? Do you not perceive that it is only the first act of my comedy that has succeeded, and that the *dénouement* of it is, at least, compromised by the mad infatuation of Roger?"

"Well!" asked Madame Barnajon, "what is it to me that your piece falls in the very first scenes? I stand for nothing in it, and of what consequence is it to me if your son should marry that little beggar?"

"Of what consequence is it to you?—what injury could it do you? In the first place, sister, it is not clear that the suit will necessarily terminate to your satisfaction or to your glory. If your advocate is certain of defeating me, mine equally guarantees my success. Yours declares that mine is a fool, mine asserts that yours is an ass. Which is to be believed? Take this little pocket-book; it contains half a dozen disinterested consultations, all signed by names of the greatest celebrity in the temple of chicanery. I beg you to consider them. You will there learn that the chances are equal, and that hazard alone can decide the issue. Suppose, now, hazard should be favourable to you. What would

ensue?—you will have gained nothing. It is true, I have to some property in Germany; but the French Themis has an arm sufficiently long to touch it. As to Bigny, by an authenticated and duly registered, this domain is secure fortune of my first wife, and descends to my son as the daughter of his mother."

"That must be proved," replied Madame Barnajon dryly. "Sister," said the comte, rising, "the air blows fresh, so do not think we are prudent in exposing ourselves so long to evening dews."

So saying, he offered his arm gallantly to his sister, and resumed the path to the château. In her turn, in the step which had never deserted her since her arrival at Bigny, Madame Barnajon had no longer the spirit nor the firmness. She was silent, and on returning to the saloon took no pains to conceal her ill-humour; whilst, on the contrary, her husband redoubled his cares, attentions, and amenities towards her. He retired early,—the comte, satisfied with his day's work, lay in his sleeve, and rubbing his hands; Madame Barnajon persevered to feel that her prey was likely to escape her, and was as ashamed as a polecat that a field-mouse might have led her to the snare. As to Malvina, she had just settled it in her mind that she would marry her cousin. Not that she loved him in the world, or even appreciated or acknowledged that he was amiable and agreeable in him; but, in addition to the merlettes which continually ran in her head, it was sufficient to pique her to the game, that the young man loved another and wished to marry her. To conquer a free heart, which belonged to nobody, appeared to her as inglorious as to assault a place already dismantled and without a garrison; to seize a heart already taken and already occupied, that was enough to tempt the ambition of any soul as lofty as Mademoiselle Barnajon.

And what was Roger doing all this while? Roger was

high that their poisonous breath shall not reach you. In that very château, where they have reviled you, a day will come, and that shall not be long first, when you shall command as a sovereign, and I will surround you there with a worship so respectful, that they themselves who now trample you under foot,—flower of innocence and beauty, shall be forced to render you homage ;”—and he galloped on, drawing blood from the sides of his horse, cutting the air with his whip, full of impetuosity and love, but of a love already painful ; for there exists scarcely any which a shaft of raillery cannot wound.

By this time night was descending from the hills into the plains. The sunset had passed by successive gradations from gold and purple to orange tints, from rosy tints to pale green. The noises of day faded away ; the stars besprinkled the heavens ; the curlews cried among the rushes at a distance.

Exhausted by the rapidity of the pace, the horse stopped of his own accord, steaming and white with sweat, in the middle of a cross road ; Roger took advantage of this rest to collect himself and reflect a little. Reflection having brought him, without much trouble, to the conviction, that if he even travelled the latter part of the journey as fast as he had ridden the first, he would arrive at Saint-Sylvain too late to allow him to present himself properly at the cure ; so he turned bridle, and spurred on again back towards Bigny, resolved to provoke, that very evening, an explanation between himself and his father. Scarcely, therefore, had he sprung from his horse in the court of the château, when, without stopping to take off his saddle and bridle, he repaired, with a firm heart and a bold carriage, to the comte's apartment, in which there was still a light. When he entered, M. des Songères was holding a conference with his faithful Robineau ; and as the latter, on seeing Roger enter, showed no inclination to yield the place to him,—

“Monsieur Robineau,” said the young man, in an imperative tone, “see that my horse wants for nothing. You hear me !—begone !”

Upon a sign from his master, Robineau retired, a little abashed, but casting the glance of a hyena at the young vicomte, as he passed him.

“Roger, I am delighted to see you,” cried the comte. “I have ordered you to be sought for all the evening, without any one being able to tell what was become of you. I confess it would have cost me something to pass a whole night with the regret of having pained you,—perhaps offended you. Think how much I regret my thoughtlessness. I have accused myself of it, &c. &c.”

have repented of it, and if you require it, will beg your pardon. The fact is, I did not think you could be in earnest to such a degree; and if I did joke about it, it was because, in truth, I was convinced that you would laugh with me."

"Father," replied Roger, "it is not that which brings me here. What is done is done; say no more about it. Only, since you have broken the truce which you yourself demanded, I think that I have a right to come and claim, on the instant, the execution of your promises."

"To cut the matter short," cried the comte gaily, "this is, I suppose, a declaration of war, and you commence hostilities. Sit down," added he more seriously, pointing to a chair; "and, before I listen to you, have the goodness, in the first place to listen to me. I will be brief."

When both were seated—

"You are in love with the niece of a curé of our neighbourhood. What is her name?—Fanchette? Jeannetton? Catherine?—ah, yes, that is it—Mademoiselle Catherine. Catherine *de* what?—Well, that's of little consequence. You love her, and wish to marry her,—that's all very good. I could find, at need, long phrases and fine discourses upon inequality of conditions, and the inconveniences of *mésalliances*; but the hour is late, and I will spare you them. I admit with you that it would be quite simple, quite natural, and perfectly equitable that the son of the Comte des Songères, the heir of his father's titles, should marry a little girl who goes about begging from farm to farm, to defray the expenses of the worship and the repairs of the church. Nothing could be better. Kings have been known to marry shepherdesses. Only tell me, without being rich, has this little girl any property?—for, after all, you must live; and the curé of Saint-Sylvain, when giving you his blessing, will not give you an income. All that that holy man could do for you would be to marry you for nothing."

"Catherine is poor, but my mother was rich," replied Roger boldly.

"My son, your mother's dowry was all swallowed up by some unfortunate speculations; not an obole of it has been left these twenty years."

"Who, then, is to account to me for it, father, if it be not you?"

"I, my son! I have nothing. I dissipated my property in obliging ingrates. In 1826, I poured fifty thousand crowns into the *caisse* of the Greek Committee,—the Turks know what is become of that. I have nothing of my own, and am only a poor

exile,—living in Germany, possessing no other fortune than that of my second wife, who, I have good reason to fear, would not permit you to touch it.”

“But, father, Bigny? this château? this domain?”

“Alas, my son! Bigny, this château, this domain, all that, in two months at most, will have ceased to belong to me. It is now about thirty years since I did your uncle, M. Barnajon, the honour to borrow several sums of him,—two hundred thousand livres, I believe, and I neglected to return them. A gentleman would have been satisfied with my word; but your uncle, like a true Barnajon as he was, would only lend me upon mortgage; so that the interests capitalized, having, in consequence of my negligence, enlarged beyond calculation the amount of my debt, it happens that at this moment, Madame Barnajon, your aunt and my sister, is in a fair way to give me notice to quit, which she will not fail to do, with every respect for my rank and quality.”

“Well, father,” replied Roger, “I am young, I will work.”

“You will work? and what at, I pray? Have you a place? Do you know a trade? Although ruined, I have given you the education of a nobleman. You know nothing, and are good for nothing. You ride well, and seldom miss a partridge on the wing; but that will go a very little way in housekeeping. Housekeeping, my son, is a serious thing. Housekeeping is a fellow who loves his ease; and who, above everything, likes to be warmly clothed and fully fed. Reduced to your own resources, with your habits of luxury and elegance, I ask you, what will become of you? Suppose, for example, you were, to-morrow, to marry Mademoiselle Fanchette, or Mademoiselle Catherine—the name is of no consequence in the affair,—do me the kindness to say where you would perch with your dove; for it is not to be presumed that the curé of Saint-Sylvain, holy man as he may be, will permit you to build your nest in the corner of his presbytery. Your children, how will you bring them up?—will you make parish choristers of them? At the death of the uncle, who is not immortal, at what table will you obtain a seat? Mademoiselle Jeanneton excels, I am told, in embroidery?—ah! she can embroider your handkerchiefs. Will love support you? Life is long; love has but a day.—But it is getting late, and I am sleepy,” added he, taking out his watch; “good night, Roger! Night brings counsel. Sleep little, reflect much; and tell yourself that your best friend, if you can possibly have a better friend than your father, would hold no other language towards you than that you have just heard.”

At these words, the comte rose from his seat.

"But, father," asked Roger, a little agitated, and tolerably like a horseman on the point of being unseated ; "you, yesterday, appeared only anxious to secure my happiness and the prosperity of my future."

"Nothing is more true," replied the comte, beginning to undress ; "I had devised a plan for placing you suitably in life. But you persist in your resolution to marry Mademoiselle Javette. Marry her,—what more would you have me say ?"

And as Roger was retiring, with a much less lofty carriage than he had entered—

"Well, my son !" cried M. des Songères, "are you going without shaking hands with me ?"

The young man held his hand out with a sufficiently bad grace, and left the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

ATTACK AT THE CORNER OF A WOOD.

FOLLOWING the recommendations of his father, he slept but little, and reflected a great deal. His reflections were not exactly *couleur de rose* ; nevertheless, he was up with the dawn, and set out for Saint-Sylvain, only, contrary to his habit, this time at a foot's pace. Close to the gates, just as he was about to pass through them, he perceived Malvina, who likewise had risen with Aurora, and was walking alone at the verge of the little neighbouring wood. Roger bowed to her coolly, and was preparing to pass on, when his cousin ran towards him, and stopped him by a winning gesture. She leant against the shoulder of his horse, and turning a supplicating look upon her cousin,—

"Roger, do not depart without having pardoned me," said she. "Pardon me," she eagerly repeated, without giving him time to reply, and taking in his whole person with the fire of her glance. "If you knew what a night I have passed—if you knew what I have suffered, and still suffer—you would not have the courage to be angry with me. Since yesterday, I have shed more tears than I have shed in the whole course of my life. From what fatality can I have shown myself to you what I have never

been towards anybody else—hard, malicious, cruel, and pitiless? I cannot think what demon urged me on. Oh! do not judge of me by that! I know, I feel, that all sincere love is respectable, whatever may be the object that inspires it, and that to ridicule it is to ridicule God. If I have done so, oh! do not be angry with me! I only thought it was a joke of my uncle's. How could I possibly suppose that you—you, my cousin—loved that girl to the extent of wishing to make her your wife? I repeat, that I thought it was a joke of my uncle's, and that I might be permitted to laugh at it. As soon as I learned it was serious, my laughter was changed to tears. Tell me, then, that you pardon me!"

"Mademoiselle," said Roger, "are you not afraid of taking cold by walking out so early in the morning?"

Malvina was silent, and two tears—two real tears—rolled silently down her cheeks, and fell upon Roger's hand.

The heart of our young man was far from being of triple brass. On seeing that beautiful bosom so agitated, and those splendid eyes filled with tears,

"I am no longer angry with you," said Roger.

"Thanks! thanks! how good you are!" said the young girl, with eager warmth, and taking Roger's hand in hers. "Love, marry that girl. Let the world talk as it likes; be happy after your own fancy. Are you not master of your own destiny, free to dispose of your hand and your name? Perhaps it is to be regretted that the inclinations of your heart were not directed higher; I sincerely believe that to be in love with one beneath him is the greatest misfortune that can happen to a gentleman. But what is to be said for it? We love where we can love; the great question is to love. Taking her altogether, she is a very good-looking young person. She has, I am told, habits of order and economy that are truly surprising; she will make an excellent housekeeper. You doubtless might pretend to a more elevated alliance, and aspire to a more brilliant position; but happiness has little to do with place, and does not require a vast horizon. The world has an opinion that love is not eternal, and that when reduced to itself, it soon becomes languid, decays and dies; you will prove that these are so many calumnies. Besides, will you not have the pious intimacy of your uncle, and the society of the Messieurs Noirel, father and son, to amuse you? It is only in a village that simple and innocent souls are still to be met with, who delightfully carry you back to the times of the patriarchs. There is only one thing that afflicts and annoys me in all this, and that is, that on account of the inveterate pre-

judices of my mother, who has the weakness to be in that respect of my uncle's opinion, you cannot present Madame des Songères to us! and we must renounce relations which time might have made delightful. Ingrate, as you are! you will heed that but little; the regrets will be for me alone."

At these words she fled across the park, and Roger continued his road in a very melancholy mood.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MEETING.

CATHERINE had quickly sunk back again into the abyss from which, for an instant, Roger's note had drawn her. It had been for her like a willow-branch thrown from the bank to a drowning person. In order not to alarm her uncle, instead of going up again to her chamber, as her heart urged her to do, she repaired, after vespers, to the sitting-room of the presbytery, in which were assembled, according to the custom of the day, a few of the notables of the place. As she entered, they were in full talk about the embellishments of Bigny, the return of the comte, and the arrival of the Barnajon ladies at the château. Every one offered his opinion; the prevalent idea was, that it was all connected with a marriage between the son of the comte and the fair young stranger, whose beauty was extolled by all; for the appearance of Malvina had turned all the heads at Saint-Sylvain, and, if we except Claude, not one of these worthy people had an idea that there existed, in the very bosom of their own village, a figure more beautiful in its wild simplicity, than the doll, dressed in gauze and satin, they had seen in the morning at mass. As soon as he perceived Catherine, Claude endeavoured to lead her out again; but misery must have unequalled attractions; Catherine persisted in remaining, and the unhappy girl was obliged to hear repeated, only in a clearer and more precise fashion, all that Paquerette had told her a few hours before.

"Begone," said Claude, from time to time to her, in a low voice; "what do you do here? You see they are talking of things they know nothing about."

Catherine did not stir, and appeared to take a cruel pleasure in all that was being said around her; whilst from the other corner of the room François Paty was observing her with a scrutinizing eye. In the evening, at supper, as long as she was in the presence of Martha and her uncle, the little maiden held out, and even, as the old pastor seemed ill and uneasy, she forced a spark of her customary gaiety to amuse him; but when once in her little chamber, in that humble retreat, which had seen her for fifteen years past so joyous, so active, and so light, working, praying, and singing, we may imagine the explosion of despair, and the tears that were shed! The night did not pass much better with the good curé, who had at length caught a confused glimpse of what was passing in the heart of his niece. He did not place things in the worst light—he judged of them as they really were; and although he did not believe the affair was serious, he accused himself with having too much encouraged by his attentions the assiduities of Roger, and congratulated himself upon the return of the comte, who would put a forcible termination to the visits of that young man. He reflected seriously whether he should speak to Catherine about the matter; but he thought the mischief so little advanced, that he feared to aggravate it by touching it. Besides, the good pastor was a little mistrustful of his own perspicacity, and was not sure that he had divined justly in this affair. And yet the appearance of Catherine, her brow clouded with care, her eyes filled with tears, —everything told him that that sweet and dear creature was unhappy; and François Paty had come to the conclusion that the worthy Claude, in spite of his excellent qualities, might not be the only cause of such a sudden change, and such great ravages.

The next morning, as he was walking alone beneath the chestnut-trees on the terrace, plunged in these reflections, and rejoicing that Roger had not appeared at the presbytery on the Sunday, which he attributed to the influence of the Comte des Songères, he perceived Roger in the court. Almost at the same instant, Catherine appeared at the foot of the stairs, and the young people stood in great confusion before François Paty, who looked upon them, however, with benignity. He took each of them by the arm, and after having led them to the bottom of the garden, he repeated, in a firm but paternal tone, what he had said to them one evening, that they ought no longer to think of seeing each other, since, as the comte was returned, Roger could not come any more without disobliging his father. In short, though he appeared to be pained by it, and was really pained on

his own account, he made him clearly understand that his visits must not be so frequent as they had been, and that it would even be better if he renounced them altogether. Not that he mistrusted these two pure hearts—God forbid he should! but, in addition to being very sincere in all he said thereupon, not wishing to be a subject of discord and division between father and son, he began to be seriously alarmed, and to tremble for the repose of his dearly-beloved child. Whilst he was speaking, Catherine only awaited a gesture or a look from Roger to throw herself into the arms of her uncle, and confess everything; but Roger offered nothing but evasive replies, and the poor little creature was obliged once more to drive back into her bosom the secret which consumed her. They parted in the evening, without having succeeded in being alone for a moment; so that after this interview, upon which she had reckoned to learn whether she was to live or die, Catherine found herself a prey to more bitter anguish than she had been the night before. Roger appeared to her constrained, cast down, sad, discouraged; he had left her without saying when he should return; she had in vain sought on his brow, in his voice, in his eyes, in his behaviour, the assurance and intrepidity which had to that time supported her. When left alone with his niece, the pastor wished to take her in his arms; but evading the caresses of her uncle, she fled away all in tears, and François Paty saw with terror that he had not been mistaken. When she reached her chamber, Catherine threw herself upon the bed, and her whole soul seemed to exhale in cries of distress. Alas! she was no longer that submissive and resigned child, who only a few days before had said to Roger, "Begone, and return no more." And thus is love constituted—always ready to renounce a happiness as long as it is sure of it, and grappling it with despair as soon as it fears to lose it. Thus everything went on from bad to worse at the presbytery. A slow fever undermined the health of Catherine. François Paty watched his niece with great uneasiness, imploring God to enlighten him, to inspire him, and to direct the hand which must touch, in order to endeavour to cure, the wounds of this young heart. On her part, old Martha, quite at a loss, and understanding nothing of what was going on around her, went hither and thither, busy without an object or aim.

At length, one afternoon, Paquerette glided like a ferret into the court-yard, and climbed like a cat up to the chamber of the little maiden. After having shut the door and made sure that Catherine was alone, she leaped upon her neck, and then drawing a letter from her pocket, pointed to it with an air of triumph

and mystery. It contained a few lines from Roger, breathing love, but not confidence; and it was evident that the young man had himself lost the security with which he still endeavoured to inspire his dearly beloved. Ardent, passionate, but vague in expression, and speaking decisively of nothing, this letter, instead of calming Catherine, only redoubled the fever which gnawed her bones.

One evening, on returning from the city, whither her uncle had sent her in the morning, I do not know under what pretence, but in reality to endeavour to divert her mind, Catherine turned on one side from her road, and, as if she had been in the secret of the preoccupations of her mistress, the gentle Annette, increasing her pace, took, of her own accord, a cross road which led to Bigny. It was already night when she arrived at the gates. Urged on by the demon of grief, Catherine alighted, and opening the gate without noise, glided into the park, so agitated that she held both her hands clasped to her beating heart. She recognized the spot where, for the first time, she had seen Roger. A few months only had passed since that meeting, and yet, alas! how was she changed from what she then was! There was the same difference as between that October evening and the May morning in which Roger had first appeared to her. She proceeded with fearful steps, and as she approached the château, she heard more distinctly the sounds of the piano which accompanied the voice of Malvina. She seated herself on the grass, and, with her head between her hands, listened to songs which appeared to mock her sadness. For some instants, Catherine had heard nothing but the moanings of the wind in the branches of the pines and larches, when the gravel of the path crackled under feet so near her that, in order not to be surprised, she had only time to conceal herself behind a cypress. Two shadows advanced with slow steps, and although the evening was dark, Catherine immediately recognized Roger and the beautiful stranger. It was, in fact, Mademoiselle Barnajon, enveloped in a white Cashmere shawl, hanging carelessly on the arm of the young vicomte.

"Why are you so sad and so absent?" said she. "Whilst I was singing, I saw the tears swimming in your eyes. What is the matter? Speak to me. Would that I had all the mental resources I have not, I would employ them all in endeavours to amuse and cheer you. Unfortunately, I have nothing but my heart. Roger, that heart is open to you, and I feel with pride that Heaven has not made it quite unworthy of yours."

The pair moved on; Catherine heard no more. But that

which she had heard and seen was quite enough to complete the desolation of death in her bosom.

Now, this girl was of a nature at once too richly endowed to renounce happiness easily, too pure to doubt of Roger, too honest to submit longer to remain in the position that young man had placed her in. She resolved to free herself from it, and the next day, with a hand more familiar with the needle than the pen, she wrote:—

“ You do not feel, then, that I am suffering ! There is nothing which tells you I am dying with sadness and disquietude ! It appears to me that if you were unhappy a thousand leagues from me, the whole world would tell me of it ; were we separated by mountains and seas, it appears to me that if your eyes shed one tear, I should feel it immediately fall upon my heart. I agitate myself, I am ill and very unhappy. God has deserted this mission ; my guardian angel has left me ; I am no longer able to pray, I dare not pray ; I no longer take delight in anything. What is going on ? I cannot doubt you, I believe in you as a myself ; but I am too uneasy and too anxious not to dread some fearful calamity. At times I think I feel, by the agonies of my own heart, the weakness of yours. But I deceive myself—do I not, Roger ? You love me, you love me still, and will love me ever ? It is since the day that I saw you at mass with those two ladies that I have suffered so much. From that time, I am as if there were a serpent tearing and devouring me. But my fate must be decided ! I must see you, I must speak to you,—above all, I must hear what you have to say. I can live no longer thus,—anything must be better than the agony that consumes me. Between Saint-Sylvain and La Hachère there is, by the road-side, a large oak which you must have observed, from a holy Virgin and an infant Jesus being to be seen amongst its branches. To-morrow, at the hour of the Angelus, I shall be at the foot of that oak.”

She folded this note, and confided it the same day to Paquerette, who set off, light of foot, and more proud than a diplomatic tyro charged with a secret mission to the court of Vienna or of Berlin.

Not doubting that the letter would be delivered to Roger, Catherine made her escape from the cure the next morning, and took the road to La Hachère, not upon Annette this time, but on foot, as if for a walk in the environs.

The morning was cold and foggy. A thick cottony mist floated over the fields, climbed the hills, and hung its flocks of wool upon the dun sides of the valleys and woods. Nature already

felt herself seized with the first shivering of winter. The linnets and redbreasts flew from branch to branch with a terrified air; battalions of cranes filed beneath the dull grey sky; the gold of the bulrushes began to shine here and there on the heaths where the spider had spread his toils, like little hammocks abandoned by the goblins and sylphs of the night.

Catherine contemplated with a feeling of tender sadness, and almost of gratitude, this dull and veiled landscape, whose tints were in such harmony with the state of her mind; it appeared as if all nature was in mourning for the loss of her happiness and of her gaiety. She walked with her head down, and, on seeing her pass, it would have been difficult to recognize the happy girl, who used to glide, only a few months before, between the hedges, fresh and smiling as spring, lively and joyous as the lark over her head. And yet, when the sun, casting aside the mist which enveloped him, began to shine with the soft and mild splendour of the decline of autumn, she felt a ray of warmth and life penetrate into her bosom. She was going to see Roger; it appeared impossible that any misfortune could reach her beneath such a brilliant sun and so serene a sky!

On the same day, and at the same hour, the Comte des Songères and his sister were walking together about the country. Not that Madame Barnajon had the least taste in the world for these morning excursions; but the comte had coaxed her out, and, *bon gré, mal gré*, she had allowed herself to be prevailed upon. Since the last conversation she had held with her brother, Madame Barnajon had meditated and reflected much. Egotism and reflection had led her by insensible degrees to view the question of her interests in a new light. After having passed long hours over the consultations which the comte had submitted to her inspection, she was forced to admit that the chances were equal on both sides, victory uncertain, and that fate alone would decide the matter. Now, since she had learnt that Bigny brought in, one year with another, twenty thousand livres, she had become more circumspect, and felt herself less disposed to run the risk of a lawsuit and the hazards of justice. On the other side, if Bigny belonged to Roger as pledged for the fortune of his mother, Madame Barnajon must think no more of it. In short, all she had observed of the disposition, the character, and mind of that young man, was quite agreeable to her, and opposed in no respect to her habits of sovereignty. A rental of twenty thousand livres, Malvina a comtesse, and a son-in-law who could be led by the nose! By all these reasonings Madame Barnajon had arrived at the desire, quite as ardent as the comte's, for a

marriage between her nephew and her daughter, and that was at this moment the only object of her ambition.

"Well, brother," said she, "everything weighed, everything examined, everything calculated, I think you were right the other evening. Not because I suppose my cause to be desperate, —no, far from that. I have cast my eyes over the papers you placed in my hands, and I don't consider myself beaten. As to your son's rights, I do not deny them; we have priority on our part. But it is melancholy, and not over moral, to hold up to the world the spectacle of our dissensions; and if you still think a marriage between our children —"

"I most certainly do still think so," cried the comte; "but here is the devil! Roger is in love like a madman; and you know, as well as I, that it is not with your daughter."

"Nonsense!" cried Madame Barnajon, shrugging her shoulders; "do you think you can make me believe that the son of the Comte des Songères is in love with that little peasant girl?"

"Seriously, he is, sister; and I again repeat, to the point of insisting upon marrying her. Do you wish for a proof that these amours are no joke? Read this letter; it is from the girl herself. I need not tell you that it was by chance alone it fell into my hands."

At these words, he held out to his sister the letter of the little maiden. Tired of wandering and walking about the château for Roger, Paquerette had resolved upon giving the letter to her friend Cadet, who, in all haste, took it straight to Master Robineau.

"An appointment!" cried Madame Barnajon, after having read Catherine's letter.

"Yes, sister, an appointment. Let them venture to tell us now that innocence dwells in hamlets, and that modesty, deserting cities, has taken refuge on the banks of rivulets."

"An appointment!" repeated Madame Barnajon,—"an appointment at the foot of an infant Jesus and a holy Virgin!"

"A charming idea!" added the comte; "to reconcile the exigencies of heaven with those of earth."

"Don't you think, brother, that is frightful? Don't you think it is our duty to prevent such a scandal taking place in the domains of our ancestors, on the lands of our fathers?"

"What the devil would you have me do?" replied M. des Songères. "Do you happen to know the secret of preventing the clouds from going whither the wind drives them, and lovers whither love leads them?"

‘But, think, brother, this unfortunate girl is in the way to troy herself for ever! The niece of a curé!—what horror! must go to her; show her the abyss gaping before her feet,— must be saved, at any rate!’

‘Sister, your sentiments do you honour. But, look,” added stopping at a turning in the road, “here is precisely the gin’s oak; and, if my eyes do not deceive me, yonder must be charmer in question, seated at the foot of the tree! . Sister, d himself has led us this way.”

‘Come, then, come, brother!’ cried Madame Barnajon, resolutely; “the question is to save a human soul.”

CHAPTER XV.

A MISFORTUNE NEVER COMES ALONE.

ATED at the foot of a spreading oak, placed from time immemorial for the invocation of the Virgin, who, from the height of her he, among the branches and verdure, appeared to cast down on her a look and smile of protection, Catherine was following with an absent eye the twirling leaves which the wind blew about, images of her illusions, about to fly away upon the icy breath of reality. All at once she heard footsteps; thinking it must be Roger, she rose hastily, and found herself face to face with Madame Barnajon, whom she immediately recognized, though she had only seen her once before. The poor girl trembled to such a degree that Madame Barnajon was obliged to support her, and to make her sit down by her.

“Recover yourself, my dear child!” said she, in a tone of maternal kindness, taking both her hands, and pressing them affectionately in her own; “it is not a severe judge, it is rather a friend whom Heaven has sent you. If chance has rendered me the stress of the secrets of your little heart, do not, on that account, either ashamed or afraid; you shall have my discretion as well as my indulgence.”

“I have neither fear nor shame, madame,” replied Catherine, boldly, for at those words she had raised her head; “I do not need the charity of your indulgence, although I am ignorant by what title it is offered to me; but of your discretion I stand in no need. Little or great, God reads all hearts; and if I were guilty, He would already know it.”

“Guilty you are not, my child; but you might become so, if

you were not shown the dangers to which you expose your youth and inexperience."

"Of what dangers do you speak, madame?" asked Catherine, with an air of astonishment. "I have never done injury to any one. On my uncle's account, every person in this country respects me and loves me; even the very dogs of the shepherds know me, and come and lick my hands."

"No doubt, no doubt!" replied Madame Barnajon, smiling; "but the most serious dangers are precisely those which we do not suspect. Now, my dear little girl, allow me to speak to you as if I were your mother. It was not me you expected at this hour and at this place?"

"No, madame, and that was why I felt so agitated on seeing you."

"You expected the son of the Comte des Songères?"

"Yes, madame, I was waiting for him," said Catherine, without the least hesitation.

"You love him, then; and he loves you?"

"Yes, madame, we love each other; and that was why I expected him."

"And have you no fear of meeting a young man alone in the fields?"

"As he loves me, madame, what can I have to fear?" replied the young girl, calmly.

After a few instants of silent reflection—

"Let us place the question plainly.—You love Roger, he loves you, and has promised to marry you?"

"Madame——"

"Don't be alarmed; this young man being the son of my brother, you must acknowledge I have some right to meddle with so important an affair. You are beautiful, my dear little girl! Since I left this country, thirty years ago, I have been far from suspecting it produced flowers so fresh and lovely as you. The first time I saw you was at mass; you were collecting for the poor. I was struck with your carriage. That is not all:—all praise your virtues and your piety. You excel, they say, in decking the church of Saint-Sylvain on Sundays and festivals. Besides, if I can trust the public voice, you embroider well, with exquisite taste. I must be very hard to please indeed, not to esteem myself happy in being able to call you my niece. Unfortunately, we have in our family and in our world some sufficiently silly ideas which exclude you rigorously."

"Believe me, madame, it would cost me dear to feel myself a stranger in the family of my husband," replied Catherine, with dignity; "but I should not trouble myself to inquire if there were

under the heavens another world beyond the corner wherein I should feel myself beloved."

"Your husband would not be ignorant of it. All he could do would be to forget it at first; but a day would necessarily come in which he would remember it. Love, my dear little girl, may occupy the whole lives of us women, who have nothing better to amuse us; but, in the existence of a man, it is but a very short episode, which scarcely fills up the fresh early morning. You would have no other ambition beyond living without pomp in the retirement of the country; but when Roger should discover that you shut out from him both his family and the world, what regrets would not then be his, what remorse would not be yours?"

"All that you say, madame, I have said, nearly word for word, to M. Roger," replied Catherine, humbly bowing her head.

"I am convinced you have, my child; I consider you to be honour and delicacy combined. I could not for an instant believe in the reports which were spread about,—that you had employed every means to bring my nephew to this point; and that your uncle had made himself, at least by his civil attentions, the accomplice of your seductions."

"Oh, madame!" cried Catherine, with a flushed face, and clasping her hands with a sudden movement of outraged pride; "if you know the wretches who say that, recommend them to be silent; recommend them strongly, madame, for they would fare very ill in this country,—and Claude, perhaps, would kill them."

"I repeat, my child, that I did not believe a word of it. The proof is that I am here; I did not hesitate to come and meet you. I am come, frankly and loyally, to address myself to your reason, even less than to your love; for, in noble hearts like yours, love is generous, and recoils not even before the immolation of itself."

"Oh, my God!" cried the poor girl, restraining her tears; "it is not in my power to love him no longer; but if it be necessary that I should die, say so, I am ready."

"No, my dear little girl, there is no necessity for your dying; only I cannot conceal from you, that you are at this moment an obstacle in the career of this young man. By birth and by fortune, heir of the wealth and titles of the Comte des Songères, Roger was called to a brilliant destiny, to which your love henceforth forbids him to pretend. You destroy all the hopes we have built on his fair head; you overthrow all the plans we have formed for his happiness. I will conceal nothing from you, mademoiselle: you reduce to despair a whole family mortally struck in the last scion of its race. Already, my brother talks of nothing less than cursing and disinheriting his son. Between these two hearts, hitherto so united, you have, unknown to yourself, fatally intro-

duced discord. Under the roof where we arrived so joyful has been nothing, since our return, but scenes of violent profound desolation. In the face of such great disaster will you do? What do you mean to do? Will you console the misfortunes of our house? Will you complete the ruin of Roger to his ruin? It is no longer for you, it is for him I pray and adjure you. Angel of innocence and piety, be against him and against yourself. Restore to its duties the which no longer knows itself, by forcing it to take back the it has given you in an hour of intoxication, passion, and madness. Alas! it is a whole family that speaks to you by me. It is a distressed father who embraces your knees; it is a mother who, from the heavens above, conjures you to save her child.

She spoke thus for a long time without being interrupted, pointing out and exaggerating at pleasure all the calamities attached to disproportionate alliances. With her arms crossed upon her breast, white, mute, motionless, as the statue at the entrance of a tomb, Catherine allowed her to talk on.

"What would you do, my poor child? Life is thus doled out to you, you will not change it. God will support you through the trial, and you will hereafter receive the reward of your suffering. I know what it costs to lose a lover. It is a hard moment to pass through; but you will find that you will recover from it. I can even say, console yourself. You are young; and if you have but one spring, that spring has more than one love. I do not need to tell you that my nephew ought to be ignorant of his passion, having interfered; otherwise it would be envenoming the cure instead of curing it. You are as pretty as heart could desire. Our family is not forgetful; rely upon its gratitude. Do not neglect nothing to recompense worthily your devotion and affection. We will employ ourselves to the extent of our power in promoting your happiness. Your church is poor,—we will enrich it. Your uncle is old,—we will make him a canon. Do you like to have the cure of Boussac or Bourgneuf?—we will place him there. As for you, my pretty dear, while you wait for your marriage advantageously, I will procure you work; engage, for my part, to wear neither handkerchief nor *fichu* that has not been embroidered by this pretty hand."

Still in the same attitude, Catherine made no reply. During an explosion of despair, Madame Barnajon made her lean against the trunk of the Virgin's oak, and respire a phial of volatile salts; and then, this being done, she departed in haste after having buried a knife in the bosom of the unfortunate on whom she was afraid of having her robe stained by her blood.

An hour after, Catherine returned towards Saint-S

broken in spirit, annihilated, not having even the strength to suffer, or to render to herself an account of what had passed. She moved along, gathering here and there autumn flowers which she stripped mechanically along the road; to behold her unequal step, her sweet but vague look, upon her lips I know not what smile a thousand times more poignant and more terrible than the transports of despair, she might be said to be struck, like Ophelia, with a poetic madness.

When arrived at the plateau which overlooked the valley of the Creuse, she recognized, through the thinned curtain of the aspens and poplars, Roger and Malvina, riding side by side, followed at a distance of a hundred paces by the little vagabond Cadet, whose boots, with yellow tops, gold lace, and varnished belt, glittered in the rays of the setting sun. Clothed in a habit of blue cloth, which displayed richly the contours of her shape, with a grey hat, from which her veil floated in the breeze, Malvina rode with as much skill as grace upon a fine Limousin sorrel steed, magnificently appointed, and stepping with pride, as if delighted with the burthen of his beautiful mistress.

Catherine thought of her little cotton petticoat, her straw bonnet, of the modest Annette; and, with a melancholy smile, she pursued her way.

A few paces further on she met with Claude, walking philosophically along, as usual, with his nose in the air and his hands in his pockets.

She could not restrain, on perceiving him, a movement of joy, and even of happiness. Grief had, unknown to her, reconciled her to her old companion. Catherine took his arm without speaking, and both walked on in silence.

They went on thus for some time, exchanging, at long intervals, a few insignificant words, when they perceived, on the side of Saint-Sylvain, a reddish light, which illumined the whole horizon and projected livid reflections far over the landscape. They thought at first it was the effect of the setting sun; but they could not long remain under that mistake, for the sun had just sunk on the other side of the horizon. In proportion as the night descended, the light invaded the heavens, and became more red and more ardent. It was a cloud with bloody sides, motionless and dark at the base, at the crest inflamed like the summit of a volcano. Claude and Catherine looked at each other with terror, without daring at first to impart their thoughts.

"It is an aurora borealis," said Claude, at length, in the hope of reassuring his little friend: "remember, last year, towards the end of autumn, we saw, from the terrace of the cure, just such a spectacle."

"Look ! look ! there are sparks !"

"They are stars that are rising."

"But that smoke ?"

"It is the evening mist."

"Listen ! listen !" cried Catherine, forcing him to stop.

They listened anxiously, and at the end of a few seconds, through the thousand noises which arise in the country at the decline of day, they recognized the knell of the tocsin.

"Fire ! fire ! it is a fire !" said Claude.

"Where ?" asked Catherine.

"At Saint-Sylvain ; it is the voice—I well know it—of the bell of our village."

They increased their speed, without uttering a word.

As they approached the hamlet, all was disorder, confusion, and desolation. The cattle, which had been brought out of the stables, strayed about at hazard, uttering long and dull bellowings. Furniture half-consumed, oaken chests, sacks of corn, mattresses, green serge curtains, covered the ground, and stopped up the ways. There, poor women dragged along their ragged children, without knowing where to find shelter ; here, a whole family lamented over the smoking wreck of its humble fortunes.

When Claude and Catherine entered the village, the flames had already consumed two houses, and were busy with a third. Collected round the door, from which the flames poured as from a crater, the idle but not indifferent crowd appeared to be waiting, in a state of anxiety we cannot attempt to describe, the *dénouement* of a drama of which Catherine and Claude had not witnessed the commencement. All hearts appeared profoundly moved, every brow was pale, and terror was depicted in every face.

"My uncle ! where is my uncle ?" cried Catherine, who had eagerly sought for François Paty, without being able to find him. "My uncle is dead !" added she, on perceiving old Martha in the midst of a group, wringing her hands, and whom the people were obliged to restrain by main force from rushing into the blazing furnace.

This is what had taken place.

The owners of the house which was burning had not yet returned from the fields, and the neighbours, as soon as the fire had gained the roof, rushed in to carry out the goods and utensils, depositing them pellmell in the place of the church. Almost everything was saved ; they had scarcely forgotten anything but an infant, suspended by its bands from a nail in the wall, as is still practised by parents in many villages of La Marche and Bretagne. They were only made aware of this omission by the

cries of the poor little creature, audible through the falling of beams and the crackling of the flames. They would have rescued it, but there was no longer time. The fire had seized everything, and not one of the spectators could muster courage to face the terrible element. A mother alone would have dared to attempt it. But the poor child still cried on, for its mother was not there.

It was then that, without thinking of his great age, and consulting nothing but his boundless charity, François Paty, who had appeared at all points during this disaster, encouraging some, directing others, consoling the victims, and pointing to the cure as a refuge ever open to the poor and afflicted—it was then, I say, that François Paty advanced through the flames, as calm and as serene as Christ walking over the waves of the troubled sea.

In vain the people cried from all parts that he must not go further, that he was rushing to certain death; in vain his vicar, Noirel, and the good Martha endeavoured to hold him back; they saw his grey head plunge through and disappear in the flaming gulf. Two minutes—two ages—had passed away, and he had not reappeared.

In the mean time the fury of the fire redoubled. The house continued falling and disappearing bit by bit: the roof was expected to sink every instant. The cries of the child had ceased, nothing was heard but a dull roaring, like the noise of a tempest. It was at this point Catherine arrived. In an instant she learnt all; her first cry was to her God, the next to Claude. But neither God nor Claude responded—Claude was lost in the crowd. Human speech is powerless in attempting to describe the heart-breaking scene which then passed in this humble village. Bewildered, suppliant, wild, Catherine flew from one to another, embracing this one, and seizing the hand of that.

"Save my uncle—save him!" shrieked she. "Has not one of you the courage to save the father of all? What will you do when you have him no longer? Cruel men!—is it thus you love us? Am I not your little maiden—your little fairy?—say, speak, ingrates! Is there one among you whom we have not comforted in your need? Some of you have seen me born and grow up among you! You, your sisters are my sisters, and you are my brothers! Will you leave my uncle, your friend, your old pastor, to die thus?"

"My children—my dear children!" said old Noirel in his turn, "I am very poor, but I promise ten good crowns to him who shall devote himself for our good curé. Think, that if we lose him we shall never find his equal. It is very fortunate," added he mentally, "that my headstrong son is not here, for he would, to a certainty, risk coat, vest, and breeches."

"My friends, my dear brothers, show a little good-will," said the vicar, though not very loud, feeling that instead of fine speeches he ought to set a good example; "these flames are nothing compared to the flames of hell."

"What, you heap of drones," cried Martha, clenching her fists at them, "you stand there with your arms crossed, whilst your pastor has not feared to throw himself into that blazing fire, to save one of your children! You ought to think it an honour, brigands as you are, to be roasted for such a good man!"

Although long to repeat, all this was said at once, amidst noise and tumult of which nothing can give an idea, whilst the fire kept launching its tongues of flame and showers of sparks through the darkness. All looked at each other in silence, horror and intense anxiety in their countenances. Collecting the remains of her strength and energy, the little maiden once more called aloud upon Claude. But Claude did not answer. Feeling herself abandoned by all, Catherine tore herself violently from the arms of those who endeavoured to withhold her, and sprang forward to go to die and bury herself with her uncle. But at this instant a loud cry burst from all hearts. Claude appeared in the doorway, bearing in his arms the old pastor, who held the infant enveloped in the remains of his cassock.

CHAPTER XVI.

PROJECTS DEFEATED.

WHILST these events were going on at Saint-Sylvain, and while the hand of God seemed to be laid heavily upon the head of Catherine, Roger was struggling, without being able to free himself, amidst embarrassments and difficulties which seemed to envelop him as in an invisible network. Of a weak and poetical nature, since his last visit to the cure, he had allowed his days to flow on, in the hope that there would arise, from one instant to another, some unforeseen incident which would extricate him from the labyrinth in which he felt himself involved. The days had passed away without bringing anything new; the position was the same, or, to speak more correctly, every day which did pass away rendered it more critical and more perilous. Let us, however, beware of calumniating our young hero. Roger had not retired in a cowardly manner from the contest; he held firmly to his hopes, and had not limited his part to remaining an

impassible spectator of the drama of his own destiny. More than once lately he had come again valiantly to the charge ; but each time his father had invariably replied, " If you will marry her, do—I raise no impediment ; only please to remember that you have nothing, and, to my great regret, I can do nothing for you ; remember, that this domain is all that remains of my property, and that within two months your aunt will be legal and legitimate owner of it." What could he oppose to such arguments ? Roger was silent, and hung his head in despair. Although brought up in luxury, he was not afraid of poverty ; but still, he must be able to offer Catherine that classic cottage in which love so willingly accommodates himself when people are but twenty. Ready for everything when he only consulted his courage, he acknowledged himself incapable of anything when he came to the examination of his resources and his faculties. Useless, handsome, and agreeable, like the lilies which spin not, he knew nothing and was fit for nothing. He envied the workman he met singing along the road with his tools on his shoulder ; he envied the fate of the labourer, who had a thatched cottage of his own, in which to shelter his wife and children. He often told himself that he had claims of restitution to bring against his father, and that by applying to the law things would turn out very differently from what the comte affirmed ; but, thanks to his ignorance of the realities of life, he knew nothing definite or precise on that head ; and, besides, as much from weakness as from chivalry, these extremities were very repugnant to him. The idea of commencing and carrying on a lawsuit was revolting to all his instincts, and cast him into nameless terrors. The law terms alone which his father employed, when the question of this affair was started between them, appeared like so many monsters, impossible to be overthrown. He was one of these vases which break at the first shock ; one of those delicate organizations to which God has given grace, and refused strength, as if He could be jealous of the perfection of His work.

And yet, what was to be done—what part should he take ? Wait, and trust to that occult and mysterious power which weak minds invoke, and of which the strong only seek in themselves the succour and support. Every day he put off to the morrow returning to the cure, hoping that from that time the face of the situation would change, reckoning upon a propitious wind, which would sweep away between night and morning all clouds and all obstacles. The morrow brought no change, and Roger awoke more perplexed, more uncertain, than he had gone to bed the evening before. He had written ; but his letter breathed nothing but the miserable state of his mind. If he set out for the cure,

he turned back when half-way there, and was ten times more depressed than when he started. If Catherine was suffering, what could he say to her? Having advanced so far, after having declared both his love and his determination, how could he confess that he found himself stopped at the first step? The simplest and the best way would, doubtless, have been to reveal everything to her; but his pride revolted against that: and then Roger was always reckoning upon some sudden inspiration, upon some to-morrow which never came.

Unfortunately, these were not the only struggles and the only combats this young man had to sustain. Since the comte and his sister had agreed to have but one aim, and one and the same ambition, everything at Bigny conspired against Catherine and against Roger's love. Whilst feigning to respect that love, already so cruelly outraged, they were continually aiming perfidious allusions at it, and that with such address and hypocritical discretion, that Roger had not even the consolation of being able to complain, or evince anger openly. Sometimes it was the comte who affected to speak of Catherine with an expression of exaggerated respect; sometimes it was his sister who launched at the poor girl one of these traits of lofty disdain which kill without having the appearance of hitting the mark. At other times, Madame Barnsion would take her nephew on one side, and in carefully-arranged conversations, endeavour to awaken in him the pride of the race and the appetite for the enjoyments which fortune and the world procure; she described Parisian society to him as an Eden, of which she had the key. In the mean time, Malvina redoubled her attentions, coquetties, and provoking seductions. In order to reach the heart of her cousin with more certainty, she made herself the officious *confidante* of his passion and of his griefs. Having entered the place under the pretext of bringing succours to it, she neglected nothing in her efforts to dismantle it. The comte and his sister contrived to afford the young people opportunities for a long *tête-à-tête*, and to be no restraint upon their intercourse. During the day, Malvina followed Roger like his shadow, in the evening she came to amuse him. She studied his tastes, and knew the airs he liked. If he succeeded in escaping in the evening, she watched for his return, and Roger was sure to find her at the piano, sighing forth a languishing ditty, seated upon one of the steps of the *perron* in a dreamy, absent attitude; or at her window, wrapped in the folds of her shawl, with an inspired look, and her long hair floating over her neck and shoulders. In the morning they met in the park. Lovers have a rage for talking of their martyrdom. *Rather than be silent, they would tell it to the birds that fly, or*

the cloud which passes. After commencing by suffering from it, and being offended at it, the young vicomte had finished by being touched with the interest his cousin evinced for him, and by finding a charm in these painful *épanchements*. Malvina justified this confidence by the wonderful art and care she employed, under the pretence of curing, of enlarging and envenoming his wounds. She had a mode of exalting Catherine which put her a hundred feet under-ground; she had a mode of praising Roger which sometimes gave him a vertigo. Then, always beneath the mantle of pity, she would exhibit, at distant periods, stifled sighs, humid glances, burning silences, and furtive pressures of the hand. It is true, the love of our young friend resisted all these attacks; but his heart had already lost its transparent limpidity; unconsciously to himself, the image of the little maiden was already no longer reflected there, but as at the bottom of a lake ruffled by a stormy wind.

Things were thus following their natural course, when the comte received the news of the disaster which had just plunged Saint-Sylvain into a state of desolation. He at once saw how important it was to his designs that Roger should remain in ignorance of what was going on in the village. Roger knew nothing as yet; but a letter might inform him of all. Without losing an hour, the comte gave his instructions to Robineau, and orders that the vigilance around the château should be redoubled. That was not all: to-day or to-morrow Roger would not fail to go to the cure. After having consulted with his sister, it was agreed they should set out the next day for some excursions in the country, and that when once on the road, they would push on stage by stage as far as they could. The object was, in the first place, to persuade Roger to be absent for a day or two; and this was confided to the care of Malvina. In consequence of this plan, that same evening, at dinner, mention was made of the ruins of Crozant, and Mademoiselle Barnajon, who professed a passionate worship for ruins, entered at once into her part, and manifested a strong desire to know these by making a pilgrimage to them.

"Nothing can be more easy," said the comte; "only you must make haste, for the season is drawing to a close; we are getting towards the end of a chance of fine weather."

"Let us go to-morrow," said Malvina.

"To-morrow be it!" replied the comte. "Unpremeditated pleasures are the only ones which have any flavour. I promise you one of the most romantic, picturesque sites that reflect themselves in the waters of the Creuse."

"That is very true," added Madame Barnajon; "there is

nothing of the kind more agreeable to be met with. 'Nephew, you cannot leave this country without visiting Crozant. You might as well go to Rome, and leave it without seeing the Pope.'

"Oh! ruins!" cried Malvina, "I adore ruins! What beautiful ones there are in the third act of 'Robert le Diable,' and which I understand the Comtesse de Blamont has had copied in her park! I know nothing more charming than to muse, with one's feet upon moss, in the shadow of an old wall, with its chinks covered with ivy. You will go with us, will you not, cousin? If we have but a moon, the treat will be complete, for ruins without moonlight are like a garden without sun."

"We shall have a full moon," cried the comte; "look, her round face is observing us through the leafless poplars of the court. Malvina is right—the star of night sets off ruins, as the star of day does flowers."

"And, uncle, there must be the sound of the horn too."

"That can be done; Cadet shall take his bugle."

"And then, uncle, there must be a storm, and an old hermit in a cowl with a white beard, who must offer us his hospitality."

"We will see about that, my charming niece; although it will be rather late to order them," replied M. des Songères, laughing.

"To-morrow, then," cried the young lady, clapping her hands. "If you will do as I wish, Roger, we will let the elders go in the calèche, and we will escort them on horseback; you upon your war-horse, and I upon my palfrey, we shall look well at the foot of the old towers. We shall have the appearance of the vignette of a romance."

"Really, I think it would be a delicious picture," added the comte, gravely. "What do you say, sister?"

"We might almost fancy ourselves in the middle ages," replied Madame Barnajon.

Here, though far from suspecting the snare they were laying for him, and having no idea that Saint-Sylvain was in mourning, and the presbytery in despair, Roger cut these fine projects short. Besides, having no heart for these poetic excursions, Roger, at once, perceived that it would be culpable, and even criminal, to travel and amuse himself in company with his cousin, whilst Catherine was counting the days, waiting and suffering. His conscience was already not too tranquil, and he was not willing to add another cause for remorse to the trouble he experienced. Besides, he had resolved to spend the day of the morrow at the presbytery. He therefore declared politely, but positively, that he would not go to Crozant either on horseback or in the carriage, but would remain at Bigny.

"Then there's a party missed," said Malvina, who did not seek to conceal her vexation.

"That's a pity," added the comte, in a tone of indifference; "for, according to the accounts of all the artists and poets who have visited them, these ruins are really worth the trouble of the journey, and that they who see them once never forget them."

"It is one of the most agreeable things of the kind that can be imagined," said Madame Barnajon; "and I confess, for my part, I should have been very willing to view them again."

"How can we?" said Malvina, with tears in her eyes; "my cousin refuses to go; we must think no more about it."

"And why not, cousin?" replied the young vicomte. "Be assured that my presence would add nothing to the gaiety of the excursion, or to the attractions of the landscape."

"Say no more about it," said Malvina, rising from the table; "you are but an ingrate!" At these words, the angry demoiselle made her escape from the *salon à manger*, and took refuge in the salon, whither her mother, her uncle, and Roger quickly followed her.

"How can you," said the comte, "afflict that poor girl so? It is not consistent with common sense! Remember, it is but for an absence of three days at most."

"You are not over gallant, nephew," added Madame Barnajon, with considerable hauteur. "In France we have quite another fashion of practising the offices of courtesy and the duties of hospitality. Your education has been obtained in Germany; the results are but too plain."

Taken between two fires, Roger approached his cousin, to endeavour to pacify her, and to explain the reasons for his refusal.

"Leave me alone! leave me alone!" said Malvina, repulsing him. "I repeat, you are but an ingrate! Have I done anything since I have been here, but lend myself complacently to all your weaknesses and all your exigences? Can you point out an instant in which you have not found in me the most tender of sisters, and the most devoted of friends? Your sorrows and your annoyances have been up to the present moment my only distractions. Is it as a reward for my tenderness and devotion, that you sulkily refuse to grant the first wish I have allowed myself to express? Is it to recompense the cares I have bestowed upon your heart, that you so cruelly wound mine? Roger, Roger! if you delight in seeing me suffer, be happy, for you have hurt me deeply; you have inflicted a wound of which I doubt if I shall ever be cured."

"Yes! yes! you will be cured of it, my angel!" cried Madame Barnajon, who, on seeing her daughter weep, began to view the

affair in a serious light. "Brother, your son is a monster. He must have sucked in his cradle the milk of a wolf; his mother must have fed him upon the marrow of lions and bears."

"In truth, Roger," cried the comte, who appeared no longer to know how to carry on the attack, "I cannot imagine how you can allow such a piece of work to be made about a trifle. I once again beg to observe it is nothing but a little trip, not much more than a walk. You would make less ado if you were being led to punishment. You fancy you are firm, whilst, in reality, you are only ridiculous."

Surrounded, worried, beaten in like a stag in a battue by his father and Madame Barnajon, overcome by the tears of his cousin, whom grief made more beautiful, and perhaps secretly affected by them, Roger was forced to end not only by yielding, but by accusing himself, and making all sorts of excuses. The reconciliation that followed was most affecting. After Madame Barnajon had pardoned like a queen whom no offence could reach, they pushed the two young people towards each other, and in the disorder of scarcely appeased despair, Malvina allowed herself to sink into the arms of her cousin, who trembled from the sole of his feet to the roots of his hair on feeling against his chest that beautiful bosom, agitated like the waves after a tempest, and against his cheek that brown and velvety skin, still humid with tears, fresh as the petals of a rose, burning, at the same time, like a summer sun. As always happens in such occurrences, Malvina protested she cared nothing about the excursion, that she renounced the idea of it with all her heart, and had only been pained by Roger's refusal,—so that young Des Songères was obliged to go on his knees to prevail upon her, and she appeared only to consent for the sake of affording him a pleasure.

The next morning Roger arose, very angry with his cousin, but much more so with himself; he was restless and anxious from the consciousness that he was going to commit a base action. But how could he retract? It was too late. To calm the reproaches of his conscience, he told himself it was, after all, but an absence of three days, at most; and that immediately after his return, he would fly to Saint-Sylvain, and that, in the mean time, he might bring his father to procure him an honourable and liberal position, if not a brilliant future. Afterwards, to set her heart at ease, he wrote to Catherine, promising himself to confide his letter to Paquerette, if he met her, or to the first peasant he should encounter on the road.

As the clock struck ten, and the sun completed the dispersion of the morning's mist, the calèche drew up at the foot of the *perron*, followed by Cadet, leading two saddle horses. The

comte, his sister, and his niece were assembled in the salon; they only waited for Roger. Madame Barnajon was in travelling costume. Clothed in a habit which closely fitted and displayed the treasures of her shape, and fell in magnificent folds from her hips to the carpet, her complexion heightened, her eye bold, and her lip haughty, Malvina resembled a young Amazon, ready to rush to combat, on the shores of some new Thermodon. Still Roger did not come. Impatient to get his son out of reach of Saint-Sylvain, the comte sent for him. At the expiration of a few minutes, the young man made his appearance in hunting costume, ready to set off, but with so depressed a countenance, that on seeing him, the party suspected he was informed of everything. And yet Roger knew nothing; he had only been seized for some hours before with most sombre presentiments. An inward voice whispered him that he ought not to go; it even appeared as if the voice of Catherine cried out to him, and called upon him to come to her assistance. After having bowed, without speaking a word, he went towards a *guéridon*, and began slowly to dip a biscuit in a glass of Spanish wine. His father, aunt, and cousin watched him in silence, with a feeling of consternation.

"Well, cousin, shall we start?" said Malvina at last, placing her hand upon his shoulder.

Like a sleeping man awakened suddenly, Roger started, looked at his cousin, and mechanically offered her his arm, which she seized, radiant and triumphant. Reassured, anxious to put an end to the matter, the comte presented his hand to his sister, and in a few seconds more all would have succeeded according to their wishes—Roger would be carried off, without suspecting anything, like a child; but at this moment, a frightful disturbance was heard from without—furious cries, the barking of dogs, furniture overturned; and behold, in the midst of the tumult, the door of the salon was thrown open violently, and gave entrance, like a bullet, through the servants, who in vain opposed him, to a personage not at all expected. Bare-headed, his clothes torn, his hair singed, his hands and face covered with burns and deep scars, calm and cold, yet terrible, the whole still exhaling a strong burnt smell—it was he—it was the brave Claude!

"Who is that? What does this fellow do here? Turn him out!" shouted the comte, pale and trembling with passion; for he divined at once that this might prove the ruin of his hopes.

"Seize him! knock him down!" cried Robineau, raging like a demon among the lackeys collected in the antechamber and crowding round the door.

"The first that stirs——" exclaimed Claude, turning round

like a wild boar against a pack of hounds. His attitude finished the sentence better than the most powerful orator could have done. No one moved. Cadet, who was ambitious to distinguish himself, was the only one who ventured to throw himself upon him, which he did like a cur upon a bull-dog; but with a twist of his finger and thumb Claude cast him twenty paces from him. This done, and the door closed, without taking the least notice of the Barnajon ladies, both mute and motionless with terror and astonishment, young Noirel pushed aside the comte, and advanced coldly and sternly towards Roger.

"What do you want with me? What have you to say to me?" asked the young man in an agitated voice. "What is going on at Saint-Sylvain? Speak!"—"You cannot be ignorant," said Claude, "the curé of Saint-Sylvain is dying."

"Well, let him die!" cried the comte; "it belongs to his age. Is that a reason for your entering people's houses, and stunning them thus?"—"Everybody dies," added Madame Barnajon; "curés are no more exempt than beadles or sacristans."

"Silence!" cried Roger; "let every one here respect the man who consoled my mother, and assisted her to live and to die!"—"The curé of Saint-Sylvain is dying," repeated Claude, without noticing any of them; "and to-morrow, perhaps to-day, his niece will be left alone in the world."

"But, *mille tonnerres!*" cried the comte, no longer able to restrain himself, and allowing the whole wolf to appear, "what have we to do with that? Do you take this château for a house of refuge, open to the nieces of country curés? Go to the devil! Come, Roger, let us begone; we are losing too much time with this silly stuff."

"Alone in the world," repeated Claude, simply and seriously; "alone, without a hearth, without support, more destitute than Paquerette, poorer than any village child."

"She can embroider," said the comte. "Poor little girl!" added Madame Barnajon. "Tell her, my friend, that she must not despair; we will do something for her. I will write to the *Sacré Cœur*. If necessary, I will pay for her entrance into the convent. I am quite affected. Have pity, brother; she is very interesting."

"Nonsense!" cried the comte. "An *intriguante*, able to teach the most depraved and the most artful! Do you think I am ignorant of her tricks? Besides, there are funds voted by the commune for orphans and the poor."—"If you believe in a God, I advise you to say your prayers," said Claude, looking at the comte with a green eye that promised no good.

But Roger made two steps towards his father. He was no

longer the weak young man we have known. Honour had accomplished the miracle that love alone had not been able to perform. With a firm look, a stern courage, and an imperious gesture, his brow illumined by his at length victorious will, Roger appeared so tall and so handsome, so noble and so exalted, that the comte himself, when looking at him, felt himself struck with astonishment, and almost with respect.

"Monsieur," said he, raising his voice, "since you have squandered the property of my mother, since it would be as difficult for you to render me an account of her fortune as of her happiness, this château, from the hour of my majority, has ceased to belong to you. If your sister thinks she has legal claims more sacred than those of a son unworthily despoiled by his father, justice will decide. In the mean while, I am here in my own house, and I call heaven to witness that Catherine shall never quit the presbytery of her uncle, but to enter beneath this roof, supported on my arm, as my wife before God and before man! If the sentiments of love and veneration with which I intend to surround her appear burthensome to any one here—your hotel is in Paris, aunt—your family is in Germany, father!"

"Your hand! your hand!" cried Claude eagerly, holding out his own. Claude and Roger shook hands like brothers. "My friend!" said Roger, "my heart is yours for ever."

"It is well it is so," said Claude; "for if you had repulsed me—if I had found you otherwise than you are—if you had only hesitated——"

"Well?" asked the young vicomte.

"Well! as true as there is a God in heaven, monsieur, I would have killed you," replied young Noirel. "To Saint-Sylvain!" cried Roger. "To Saint-Sylvain!" repeated Claude. And they left the salon, holding each other by the hand.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH IS FOUND THAT WE SHOULD DESPAIR OF NOTHING.

ALREADY half worn out by years and the labours of his troublesome and pious ministry, François Paty could not rally after his exalted effort of heroism and charity. His strength had betrayed his courage; he was about to crown his life by his death.

His last days were employed in consoling those for his approaching end whom he had aided and supported twenty years.

"Why do you weep, my friends?" said he to his parishioners, who crowded, morning and evening, round his bed. "Why do you grieve in this way? You see that I could not henceforth be of any service to you here below, and that it is time I departed. If Claude had not come to my assistance, I should have remained in the flames, without the power of saving the poor little one. Let this body, no longer good for anything, return to the earth whence it came. My soul will not cease to dwell among you, nor to pray for you to the All-powerful. I will speak of you to the patron saint of your village. I will tell him you are all worthy people, sober, orderly, laborious, and honest. Don't allow me to speak falsely! if you do, what opinion will good Saint Sylvain form of your ancient pastor? Honour my memory less by your regrets than by your actions. Shed no tears upon my grave; rather spread around it the modest perfume of your virtues and your labours. Remember that God will demand of me an account of the flock whose guardianship was confided to me; know that every time when you shall merit well of your Divine Master, my soul will glorify itself for it in heaven, and my old bones in the depths of the grave will leap with joy."

Then he did not fail to add, for that was his only thought,—
"I bequeath to each of you the only treasure I ever possessed in this world,—that is my niece, the daughter of you all. I leave her poorer than the poorest among you. Close in around her when I shall be no more; envelop her in your love; be to her all one same family. Do not forget—remember constantly, that of all those who shall join me above, I shall demand before God what they have done for my child, and if my Catherine is happy."
The day after the disaster, in order to assure himself that the devotion of himself and Claude had not been in vain, he desired the child which had cost him his life to be brought to him.

"Pardon him, monsieur le curé!" cried the mother, throwing herself on her knees by the bedside, as she presented the child to him.

"Pardon thee, poor innocent creature!" said François Paty, taking him gently in his arms; "if I enter Paradise, it will perhaps be thy hands which have opened the gates to me. But, my dear friend," continued he, addressing the farmer's wife; "never again suspend your children like sacks against a wall; besides accidents, which cannot be foreseen, you expose the poor little things to perishing in your absence of congestion of the brain." And saying this, he ordered the trifle of money left in the cure to be given to this unfortunate woman, who was ruined by the fire. *It was thus* he prepared himself to die as he had lived, having *nothing but good words for all, and stripping himself to cover his*

neighbour,—and, I say it without exaggeration, not reserving wherewithal to pay for the bier on which, perhaps, on the morrow, his mortal remains would be placed.

His end would have resembled the evening of a fine day, but for one incessant preoccupation, which deeply troubled the calm and serenity of it. If he was terrified at leaving Catherine poor and without support, what he had discovered of her secret was far from restoring him confidence or security. He still believed it to be a silent love, scarcely defined, perhaps unavowed and buried safely in the folds of the heart it was consuming. If he had had any idea that matters were as they were, if he had known that his niece and Roger had pledged their mutual faith, knowing the comte and his son as he knew them both, what would have been his terror? He might as well have left the daughter of his sister to be supported by a reed, or under the guardianship of a dove.

Although he believed, at most, but half of the evil, that was enough to fill his soul, already on the wing, with anxiety and terror. Time passed. It became necessary to find a shelter for, and fix irrevocably, the destiny of Catherine immediately. After having assured himself of the inclinations of Claude, the pastor thought of nothing but inducing his niece to seek refuge in the only port that was open to her,—reckoning, for this, upon the precocious reason of that child whom God, in His goodness, had made at once so wise and so beautiful.

One day,—the day on which, of his own accord, Claude had set out in search of Roger, for he well understood that in her grief and abandonment, it was towards that young man that Catherine directed her hopes,—Catherine was alone by the pillow of her uncle. Overcome by fatigue, Martha had gone to throw herself upon her bed. Herself exhausted, unable to hold out longer, the poor girl had just sunk into a slumber. Her head languidly reposing on the back of the chair, her arms hanging lifeless down her weary body, she slept with that half-sleep in which suffering still watches. Seated motionless in his bed, François Paty contemplated that pale countenance with an ineffable expression of sadness and love.

“Child!” murmured he to himself; “thou who, during twenty years wast the delight of my desert hearth, I bid thee adieu; lovely and dear creature, of whom I had promised myself to witness the chaste joys which had, alas! been denied to me. Adieu, thou smile of my old age!—bright ray of my days, adieu! Be thou blessed, young companion of my austere pilgrimage! Be thou blessed, thou charming voice which sangest in my solitude! Be thou blessed, thou pretty flower which the hand of the Lord attached to the robe of the poor priest!” At the words he bent

gently over her, and softly kissed the alabaster of her brow. At the touch of his lips, already cold and so soon to become icy, Catherine started, opened her eyes, passed her thin burning hands quickly over her face, and, in her turn, contemplated the white head of the pastor, who had sunk back again on his couch.

"My uncle!" said she, "it appeared to me in my sleep as if you were bidding me adieu; and I thought I felt your soul alight upon my brow before it ascended to heaven."

François Paty made no reply. He drew his niece to his bosom, and two tears, which he could not restrain, flowed down his livid cheeks. Up to this time, Catherine, deceived by the smiling calmness of her uncle, had not lost all hope; by this tender silence she plainly saw all was over, and her uncle was about to die.

"Is it, then, true! is it, then, true!" said she in a stifled voice, clinging to the breast of the good curé, who inundated her with tears and kisses.

"Oh, my God!" cried he, "you know this heart has never murmured against the decrees of your will. When you have struck me, I have blessed your right hand. You summon me: Lord, I am ready. You see, my God, that it is only over this child I weep! My daughter, what is about to become of thee? What shall I answer to thy mother, when she shall ask of me what I have done, before quitting thee, to secure the happiness of thy destiny?"

"Take no heed of me, my uncle," replied the young girl sadly, shaking her head. "When she has lost you, what happiness can your Catherine look for in this world? I will work. God, who takes charge of the little birds, will not abandon me. I am beloved in the village; I have also good friends in the city who will come to my aid. And further, in case of need, I will write to Monseigneur de Limoges, who, in remembrance of you, will throw open to me the gates of some convent. Be not uneasy then, my uncle, on my account."

"My child," replied the pastor, "God rarely permits the dead, however dear they may have been during their lives, to carry away for ever the happiness of those who remain on earth. He makes joy spring from regrets as grass springs from graves. If it were otherwise, I should not forgive myself for dying. Thou art beloved in the village and in the city, but that will not suffice for the peace of my last hour. Thou in a convent, thou swallow of the air! No, no, thou shalt not renounce that beautiful and holy nature which we have both loved so much, and in which thou wilt feel, when I shall be no more, my soul, *floating* upon the breezes, and mixed with the perfume of the *valleys* and the woods."

After this he continued to speak with unction of the duties, the joys, and even the griefs, from which no creature can escape; then, when he had pointed out to her that a family was the only object of the destiny of woman, the domestic roof the only place of refuge in which it is permitted her to seek happiness with dignity, adding, that out of it all is but trouble, error, and confusion, the pastor naturally came to the subject of Claude.

Catherine listened, with her eyes cast down, her heart big with the secret which longed to burst from it. Then came an instant in which, torn with remorse, and able to hold out no longer, she sank on her knees, and, with her arms extended towards the dying man, "Pardon! pardon!" cried she, "I will tell you all; my father, you shall know all. It is better even to disturb the end of your life than to allow you to depart without a knowledge of my whole soul." And there, kneeling, with her hands clasped, beneath the indulgent eye of the old priest, she poured out all that she had heaped up within her bosom, since the day of Saint Sylvain, of love, hope, bitterness, and despair. She told all; and when she had told all, with her head bowed down, she awaited the sentence of her judge. François Paty remained for a long time stunned, and, as it were, crushed beneath the blow of this confession.

"All-powerful God!" cried he, "if you do not think that the sixty years I have passed on earth have been quite useless to the happiness of some of your children, deign to give these failing hands the strength to extricate this frail creature from the abyss into which my imprudence and blindness have allowed her to fall. My daughter, rise. Come hither, nearer still. Do not conceal the blush upon thy brow. I alone am guilty: young and beautiful, alike as two mornings of spring, you could not avoid loving each other. I ought to have foreseen that your souls would irresistibly attract each other, like those two restless flames which we saw one evening, over the marshes, seek and pursue each other, and, at last, mingle. My daughter, love is divine. It is a short and enchanted passage by which God has decreed that youth should arrive, smiling and without effort, at the duties of virility. Noble children, it was thus you have understood it, since marriage was the aim you immediately pointed out to yourselves for your mutual tenderness. But, have you asked yourselves, in the ecstasy of your chaste transports, if that object were not out of your reach, if it were ever permitted you should attain it? Listen to me,—do not turn away. What would love be? would it be a divine essence, as I told you just now, if reason and prudence were not permitted to direct its flight? I have had but little experience; I am about to die an old man."

and I have not loved; but supposing that between the son of the Comte des Songères and the niece of the curé of Saint-Sylvain a union were possible, say, violet of the woods, daisy of the meadows, what wouldst thou do in that world that thou understandest not, and which would still less understand thee? Dost thou think that if this young Roger were to marry thee to-day, in the face of heaven, that thy old uncle would die the happier for it? He would die twice. I know this young man; it would not be thou that wouldst depend upon him,—he would depend upon thee. Since the return of his father, what has he seriously undertaken for thy happiness? Where is he at this moment? What is he doing? Ah! doubtless, you will say he is ignorant of what has passed; but they who really love are ignorant of nothing.”

Then he placed the position of Claude in face of that of Roger, and Catherine was silent,—when, all at once, she escaped from the arms of her uncle, a faint flush of triumph and joy darted from her humid eye, and illumined her pallid brow. Steps were heard upon the stairs, the door opened, and Roger and Claude entered together. As the comte had done on seeing Claude appear in the salon at Bigny, François Paty perceived, on seeing Roger, that all was lost, and that the ruin of his last hopes was at hand. Roger went first to the bed of the pastor, and then threw himself at the feet of Catherine, who, overcome by so many emotions, had sunk into a chair. He took her hands; and his lips, with kisses, poured out upon them all that a young heart can contain of the most passionate, the most tender, and the most generous. “Pardon me! pardon me! I knew nothing,” said he; “I believed you were happy.”——“Happy!” murmured Catherine.

“Alas!” added Roger with the loyalty of a man who accuses himself, or rather with the candour of a child who is not in the secret of his own weakness, “and I was going a journey of several days.”

“A journey of several days!” replied Catherine sadly.

“Yes,” resumed Roger; “I was setting out when Claude came to inform me what had happened.”

“Claude! always Claude!” murmured Catherine, but in so low a voice that nobody heard her.

When Roger had finished speaking, after he had offered all he possessed in the world, Catherine preserved a thoughtful silence, and allowed a searching and reflective look to pass slowly from the young man to the old man, from the old man to Claude, who, *having* retreated to the back of the apartment, stood modestly in *the shade*. Roger on his knees, François Paty propped up on *his couch*, both waited, the one full of hope, and the other of

fear. Claude was the only one who expected nothing. Several minutes passed away thus.

And what was going on all this time in the heart of Catherine? By one of those instantaneous perceptions which defy analysis, did she understand all that had passed during the last few days in the heart of the young vicomte. Did she tell herself that the sacrifice of her whole life was not too much to secure the peace of the last hours of her old friend? Did she revolt before the idea, that by accepting the offers of Roger, she should be, as Madame Barnajon had said, an obstacle in the destiny of this young man? Or else, when recalling all that Claude had been for her, did this girl prove an invincible necessity for crowning so many abnegations and so much disinterestedness?—We do not know.

With a quick movement of tenderness and despair, like a young mother who is being separated from her child, Catherine took the fair head of Roger between her hands, and kissed it, again and again, upon the brow and upon the hair; then she arose, and advanced seriously towards Claude.

"My brother," said she, "thou knowest my heart; thou knowest the martyrdom it undergoes. I doubt that I shall ever be cured of it; and, if ever I recover, I shall always retain within me something pleasingly sad, which neither time nor death can eradicate from my soul. All that I can promise, and I promise it before God, is to preserve intact the honour of the hearth at which I shall have a right to sit. Say now, then, if thou hast courage and strength enough to assist me in crossing the threshold of thy house?" If he had not leant against the wall, Claude, at these words, would have sunk to the ground. He drew his hands from his pockets, and said, "Where thou wishest to go, I will go and will carry thee in my arms."

"Think well of it, my brother; do not deceive yourself by an illusion," replied Catherine gravely. "Thou art about to accept a very rude task. Thou wilt behold me smile much less frequently than weep. Alas! she is no longer the little fairy of the village."

"My sister," replied Claude, more and more agitated, "whether thou bring with thee sadness or joy, blessed shall be the day when thou shalt enter the house of my father!"

"Give me thy hand, then," said Catherine;—"friend of my childhood, we have suffered, and we still do suffer from the same evil. Since you desire it, we will endeavour to cure ourselves together." At these words, she drew Claude towards the bed of the pastor; then, after making him kneel down by her side,—
 "My father!" said the little maiden, "bless your two children."

Three days after, in a grey cold morning, a funereal *cortège* issued from Saint-Sylvain, and took its way slowly towards the cemetery of the village,—the vicar at the head, and near him little Jean bearing the cross; then a coffin, borne by four of the notables of the country, among whom was Claude; immediately behind it was Catherine, supported by old Martha, surrounded and followed by all the inhabitants of the hamlet; not one was wanting; there remained not a soul in Saint-Sylvain, except the ringers who sent the last farewell to the dead. All heads were uncovered. Nothing was heard but the crackling of the dry leaves beneath the feet of the crowd, the melancholy sound of the bell lamenting through the fog, and, at intervals, a lugubrious chant almost immediately interrupted by sobs. Here and there, women, children, and old men, who had come from the surrounding places, joined the funeral convoy in silence. There were likewise a few persons from the city; and among them the two amiable sisters whom our readers may not, perhaps, have forgotten. The train was closed by a sorrowing, pale young man.

The *cortège* arrived at the cemetery without confusion or disorder, in steady solemnity. But when the noise was heard of the coffin slipping along the ropes which let it down into the grave, and when it resounded dully beneath the first shovelful of earth thrown upon it by the vicar with a trembling hand,—then was exhibited a spectacle worthy of the deepest pity. The ranks were broken, hearts suppressed their feelings no longer, and cries and moanings burst from all parts of the assembly. No, never was a more touching homage rendered to virtue. There were women who begged of the gravedigger, and carried away as relics, a little morsel of the earth which had touched the wood of the coffin. Others cast into the hole, when it was being filled up, their marriage rings and the hair of their children. And Catherine! Catherine! great God! she had to be torn from beneath the coffin, which she embraced with convulsive tenacity, and to be withheld by force, on the edge of the grave, from precipitating herself into it.

When the freshly-moved earth arose like a hillock above the turf, the crowd, before they retired, pressed around the niece of the pastor; and all the women of the village, the poorest as well as the rich, disputed the honour of leading her to their dwellings,—for they knew that she was thenceforward without an asylum, as her uncle, on dying, had not even left wherewithal to cover the expenses of his sepulture.

“Come with me, my daughter! come with me!” exclaimed *each* of them, kissing her hands; “the good God will enter our houses with you.”

"Thanks, my good friends, thanks!" replied Catherine; "my uncle himself has pointed out the door at which I ought to knock." The two young sisters, in their turn, approached her. "Follow us to the city," said they, embracing her; "our mother will have one daughter the more."

"Thanks, kind ladies, thanks!" replied Catherine; "but I am not willing to quit the corner of earth in which repose the bones of my uncle."

At length the pale young man, who had closed the train of the *carriage*, and had till that time held himself aloof, pierced through the already thinned crowd, and advanced towards Catherine. But the young girl turned aside her head, and leaning upon the arm of the elder Noirel, followed by Martha and Claude, she left the cemetery and took the road to the village. This young man descended into the depths of his heart, and felt himself judged. By descending still deeper, perhaps he might have found, beneath his despair, an almost imperceptible sentiment of satisfaction and deliverance.

CONCLUSION.

NEARLY a year had passed away without there being any question of marriage between Catherine and Claude. Catherine never spoke of it; Claude never made the least allusion to it; and as the little fairy embroidered from morning till night, and Martha took upon her the charge of the household cares, Father Noirel, not a very bad man at bottom, asked for no more. Endowed to the highest degree with that delicate kindness which knows how to be attentive without ostentation, vigilant without importunity, since he had lived under the same roof with Catherine, Claude had redoubled in his respectful, silent adoration and attentions towards her. There was no reason why this state of things should not be prolonged indefinitely, if Father Noirel had not taken upon him to put them in order, much against his will, for the old miser was as tenacious of life as he was of his pistoles. One fine morning he was found dead in his bed. From that time Catherine perceived that she could not continue to take her seat by the fireside of Claude, as she had done at his father's. There was no idea of retracting. They decided by common accord, that they would be married at the end of three months, and that in the mean time Claude should reside in the city, where business, which he did not explain, according to his account, imperiously

demanding his presence. A report prevailed in the country that old Noirel had left a considerable property behind him. Some said twenty thousand crowns, others carried the amount up to forty. Without saying anything of the hoard buried in the paillasse, old people of the hamlet remembered very well two or three little inheritances which had fallen to the churchwarden in his early days, and which, realized and placed out at high interest, as supposed with some reason, must, during twenty years, amount to a round plump sum. Claude preserved a profound silence on the subject, and said not a word of it even to Catherine, who never gave it a thought, and who, in the austere retirement in which she lived, never going out but to church and to visit the cemetery where her uncle reposed, was ignorant even of the reports in circulation. However it might be, on the day following the death of his father, young Noirel gave in his resignation of his offices of schoolmaster and singer at the lutrin, which latter was a real loss to the parish, and is not yet repaired. As an instructor of youth, perhaps his equal has been met with; but as a singer at the desk, many years will pass away before the church of Saint-Sylvain will hear so sonorous and majestic a voice resound beneath its rafters. When about to dismiss his pupils, Claude made them a little speech, which appeared to affect the young scamps deeply, particularly when they understood that their master was renouncing the professorship, and that they were to be deprived of the benefits of education for an unlimited period of time. These amiable children expressed their feelings by cries of wild joy, which knew no bounds when Claude gave each, as a pledge of abdication, two double sous, to go and play at *bouchon* with in the Place, where he afterwards was seen walking among them, like Sylla in the streets of Rome, after he had laid down the insignia of the dictatorship.

About the same time, the domain and château of Bigny were put up to sale. A few days after the funeral of François Paty, under the pretence of diverting his melancholy Roger had been carried off to Paris, where, from distraction to distraction, the young man had ended by giving up the contest, and marrying his cousin at the end of six months. The day following the marriage, having got rid of his son and his lawsuit, the comte set out for Germany, taking with him his faithful Robineau. A few weeks after that, Madame Barnajon acquired the certainty that Bigny, which, according to the comte's story, brought in an annual amount of twenty thousand livres, was not worth more than forty thousand at most, comprising the château, which was falling into ruins, and from which the comte, before his departure, had taken care to remove all the luxury and borrowed splendour

with which he had dazzled his sister. This somewhat late discovery had changed into a moon of gall and absinthe a honeymoon which had already begun to shine with abated splendour. Provoked by the reproaches of an aunt, backed by those of a mother-in-law, tortured by regrets, disgusted with the vanities of Malvina, determined never to set his foot again upon the spot of earth where his happiness had been wrecked, Roger, by his own authority, put up the domain of his ancestors to sale.

As it had been agreed upon, Claude and Catherine were married at the church of Saint-Sylvain three months after the death of the good man Noirel. It was but a melancholy ceremony; to judge by the appearance of the parties, it might have been thought, that instead of a wedding, they were celebrating some funeral solemnity. Claude was serious and self-collected; Catherine had laid aside her mourning habiliments for a day, but grief was stamped upon her brow and upon her countenance. Kneeling at the foot of that altar where François Paty no longer ministered, the same idea crossed the heart of both at the same instant, and both burst into tears. The whole congregation was near following their example. Our friend, the vicar, who had succeeded to the old pastor, felt himself much affected, and when, having to bless the young couple, he alluded, in a short exhortation, to the merits and virtues of the good curé, his voice trembled, and sighs and moans were audible from all parts.

On leaving the church, Claude placed Catherine, Martha, and Paquerette in a little osier carriole, which had been stationed on the Place since morning; then taking his seat on the shaft, he bestowed a cut of his whip on the gentle Annette, who set off at her best speed. As she expected some little surprise, a repast, for example, under the boughs, in one of the islets of the Creuse, Catherine had not thought it worth while to ask whither they were going. Such was, likewise, the stupor into which the idea of her being the wife of Claude had plunged her, that she might have been conveyed thus, without heeding it, to the end of the world. But Martha, however, was beginning to be astonished at the length of the ride, when suddenly Catherine, putting her head mechanically out of the carriage, perceived, to her no small astonishment, at not more than a hundred paces' distance, the gates of the park of Bigny, towards which Claude appeared to be guiding Annette. In vain she called out. As if he were quite deaf, Claude resolutely drove up the avenue of the château, and did not stop till he gained the courtyard, where he received his wife in his arms, who, more dead than alive, could scarcely believe she was not dreaming.

Catherine was not dreaming. Only the park and the château.

thanks to the revolutions they had undergone, were scarcely recognizable. Of the old mansion only one wing had been preserved. The rest had given place to a pretty farm-house, with a tiled roof and green shutters, surrounded by good farm-buildings. In this place, which not many months before had been so dismal and desolate, everything breathed life, movement, order, and labour. The crowing of cocks mingled with the bellowing and bleating of herds and flocks. All one side of the court was covered with instruments of agriculture and gardening. A cow, with brown sides spotted with white, was grazing at will in the midst of a large lawn. The only turret that had not been pulled down was transformed into a dovecot, around which wheeled flocks of pigeons. The interior of the farm corresponded with the outside; everything was neat and comfortable, with that elegance which springs from the heart, which fortune does not always possess and which simplicity does not exclude. The furniture was of walnut-tree, but so clear and shining that the face might be seen in it. In the wing of the château which was left standing was a chamber exactly like that Catherine had occupied at the cure,—furnished in the same manner, arranged in the same order. Catherine recognized, on entering it, her little maiden bed and the ivory cross which, during twenty years, had protected her sleep. The park no longer existed. It was replaced by an orchard and a garden, the vegetable beds of which were bordered with hyacinths and pinks. All this had been done as if by enchantment. It is not that La Marche is the land of fairies; we have only to recollect it is the country of masons and builders.

After he had led Catherine by the hand and shown her everything, after he had taken her without pride or ostentation from her chamber to that of Paquerette, from the stables to the dovecot, from the poultry-yard to the garden, Claude said:—“Everything here belongs to thee. It is but the half of thy dreams; why have I been unable to realize them all! Even at this hour I would give my life to be able to add to this little domain the happiness which would enhance the value of it.”

At these words the poor girl was near dying with shame, grief, and confusion, for her heart was far from being cured, and although profoundly affected by the proceedings of the good Claude, she shrank with dread from the reward he would expect for them; she was angry at his having brought her here on the very day of her marriage; she would have wished he had added *more tact* and delicacy to so much generosity. Alas! they had *demolished* the walls of the château, and cut down the trees of the *park*; but, whatever had been done to entirely transform these

places, they had not succeeded in driving the image of Roger from her heart. Catherine had flattered herself that this day would never end. She beheld with a feeling of unspeakable terror the sun descend in the horizon, and night fall successively upon the fields. She had but vague and confused ideas of the ends of marriage, but the shade which fell from the heavens appeared to her to be peopled with hideous spectres and threatening phantoms. Claude, when showing her every corner of the farm had said, "Here is thy chamber, here is Martha's, here is Paquerette's;" but he had never said, "Here is mine." Added to which, old Martha who swam in joy and suspected nothing of what had been going on for more than a year in the heart of Catherine, did not spare either sly allusions or suspicious jokes. There were moments in which, with her brow covered with blushes, Catherine was inclined to fly away and throw herself into the Creuse. All that restrained her was the consciousness of what Claude had done for her, and also that of the solemn engagements she had contracted by the bed of her dying uncle.

Between eleven and twelve o'clock, however, Martha could not but observe that Claude, who had gone out after supper to give here and there the glance of the master's eye, had not yet returned. In spite of Catherine's remonstrances, she went to seek him and ferreted out every place; but there was no Claude! No one knew what had become of him. After, at least, an hour of useless perquisitions, furious and scandalized beyond expression, Martha returned to Catherine, who smiled at her anger, and retreated to her chamber. Trembling and delighted at the same time, she undressed herself in haste, and smothered herself up in her little bed with a feeling of comfort, and was not long in falling into a profound sleep.

At the end of a few hours, the pretty sleeper was awakened by the various noises of the farm. She hastened to the window, which she opened. A warm sunbeam entered at the same time into her chamber and into her heart. The sheep bleated as they were driven out to the fields; the cattle lowed at inhaling the fresh morning air; the hens clucked in the yard; the pigeons cooed in their dovecot. Everywhere at once, Martha was initiating herself into the duties of her new empire. Father Radigois was harnessing the plough. Seated beneath the udder of a cow, Paquerette was making the smoking and frothy milk stream through her fingers. At this picture of the Flemish school, which was spread before her eyes, Catherine could not refrain from a smile, nor suppress such a feeling of pleasure as she had not experienced for more than a year. She told herself that she was queen of this little kingdom; a vague forethought.

arose in her mind that all was not over with her, and that life had still some happy days in store.

To recover itself, and substitute, without effort, fruitful reality for the chimeras of youth, to arrive at a comprehension that duty, as well as passion, has its poetry, it was, perhaps, only necessary for this bruised heart and depressed spirit to enjoy a little repose, silence, and liberty.

In the course of the morning, whilst Catherine, dreading to see him appear, began to be seriously alarmed at the disappearance of Claude, a messenger from the city brought her the following letter:—

“CATHERINE.—Thy heart is still suffering greatly. Being now useless, I feel that my presence would only irritate thy griefs and retard thy cure. I depart, but as I go, I feel happy in the thought that your uncle in heaven may be satisfied with me. If I had believed it possible, without binding thy life to mine, to make thee accept the modest sufficiency which my father has left me, I would have said to thee: Take all. But then thou wouldst have taken nothing. Pardon me for having espoused thee; I only did it to obtain the right of giving thee all. Thy fortune is not great; but it is enough to allow thee to live in comfort, sheltered from want; it is enough to allow thee to do some good to thy poor, of whom I wish thee to continue the beloved Providence. Be not uneasy about me; I take with me more than I need. I am going to travel for a time, and endeavour to rub off a little of my uncouthness by mixing with the world. For thee, my sister, try to cure thyself, if not quite, at least sufficiently to endure me when I come to ask thy hospitality; thou wilt easily find a corner in which to place me; and thou shalt see that I will not be very troublesome. And then, if it annoys thee to behold my nose, which used to make thee laugh so formerly, I will leave thee again, not to return any more till thou sendest for me—thy brother.

“CLAUDE.”

Catherine, after having read it, carried this letter to her lips, and then placed it as a talisman next her heart.

At the end of a year Claude returned. We do not know whether he departed again or not; all that we know is, that he arrived exactly on the day at which the history of the little maiden terminates.

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